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Daughter of the Gold Rush

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Daughter of the Gold Rush

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Daughter of the Gold Rush

Daughter of the Gold Rush

Klondy Nelson with Corey Ford

Random House



New York

Dedicated to the memory of my dear mother and all the other brave pioneer women who followed their footloose men into the gold diggings of Klondike and Nome, sharing their hardships and eventually bringing civilization and home life into the wilderness that was Alaska

Illustrations

(Between pages 120 and 121)

- Klondy and her mother joining her father in Council,
1902
- Klondy's father prospecting on Ophir Creek near Council,
1902
- Freighting under difficulties, Nome
- Street scene in Council about 1905
- The Nelsons' home in Nome
- Little brother Ophir prospecting with his toy windlass
at Solo Mine
- Eskimos: woman and babies at Nome; boy of Kashunuk
in seal hide and eider-skin parka
- Klondy fishing for tom cod in winter, period between
1914 and 1917
- Alaskan honeymoon: Klondy Nelson Dufresne and her
husband Frank, dressed for the high country
- The Dufresnes' first home in Fairbanks
- Frank on his power-driven houseboat *Beaver*, checking
Indian beaver skins for the Alaska Game Commission
- Klondy with the Dufresne dog team near Fairbanks
- Arctic wildlife: flocks of waterfowl; reindeer herd along
shore of Selawik Lake in summer—their antlers in
velvet

Daughter of the Gold Rush

One

Suddenly the whole ship shuddered as the engines went into reverse, and the anchor chain rattled out, and the whistle gave a loud blast. A second later we heard what seemed to be an answering echo from shore. It was the Malemute dogs in Nome, howling a mournful greeting.

Mother grabbed my hand, and we hurried up on deck. I was wearing a short box coat and white serge skirt, long black stockings with high-buttoned shoes, and my Sunday-best pair of kid gloves my grandmother had sent me from Sweden. I still have those little gloves pinned in my album today. I had a round sailor hat on the back of my head, with an elastic under my chin and a long ribbon hanging down the back, and Mother had spent hours curling my long hair around her finger. Father had always been a little disappointed because I didn't turn out to be a boy, but Mother told me that if I looked pretty enough when he saw me, maybe he'd be glad I was a girl.

The Bering Sea was so shallow that our steamer had to anchor two miles offshore. A tugboat was coming out to the ship, hauling a scow for the passengers. The skipper leaned out of the pilothouse window, and glanced at the people along the steamer's rail.

His eyes stopped on me, and he took off his knitted cap and scratched his head.

"By God, they've showed up here with everything from pigs to floozies," he bellowed to our captain, "but this is the first time I ever see anybody bring a baby girl to a gold rush."

My father had wanted to name me Klondike. The big stampede was at its height in 1897, when I was born, and he insisted on calling me that for good luck. But my mother said that Klondike wasn't any name for a girl, so my father gave in and shortened it to Klondy. For my middle name he chose Esmeralda, the name of the gold claim in South Dakota he was working at the time. He'd thought of naming me after the mining camp where we lived, but Mother put her foot down. Years later, when I visited South Dakota again, I found out why. The name of the camp was Blacktail Gulch.

I was only two weeks old when my father left us and went off to the Klondike. I guess he'd been planning it in his mind a long time, but he didn't tell my mother until after I was christened. They had been married a year and a half when he set out to join the endless file of prospectors over the Chilkoot Trail. Mother was fresh from Sweden—she still spoke with an accent—and she was terrified at the thought of being left alone in a strange country. She did her best to talk Dad out of it, reminding him that he'd said there was plenty of gold in Blacktail Gulch. Why did

he have to go to the far ends of the earth to look for more? But the fever was in his blood.

It's hard to explain my father today. I've tried to tell my grandchildren about him—I have six of them living here in Olympia, Washington—but they can't understand a man who would leave his wife and baby daughter and run off like that. He must have been selfish and shiftless, they say, but it wasn't that. Dad was a stamper, and there were tens of thousands like him in those days. They would always leave a sure thing to follow rumor. It wasn't just the gold, because when they found it they staked it all to look for more. Somewhere just over the next mountain there were nuggets as big as boulders, waiting for their picks to uncover, and no hardships could halt them. "I wanted the gold and I sought it," Robert Service wrote. "I scrabbled and mucked like a slave." My dad was always quoting Robert Service, the young bank clerk in Dawson who used to make up poems to entertain the miners. I've always wondered whether he might have had someone like Father in mind when he penned the lines:

"There's gold, and it's haunting and haunting;
It's luring me on as of old;
But it isn't the gold that I'm wanting
So much as just finding the gold."

Dad wrote regularly over the next four years. His letters were always full of glittering promise. He was going to strike it rich any day now, and come home. He hit pay dirt in the Klondike, but then he heard of a

new stampede, and his next letter said he was joining the rush down the Yukon River to the big strike at Nome. I was going on five when Dad wrote, in the spring of 1902, that he was pulling up stakes in Nome and heading for the latest discovery at Council, eighty miles farther. Mother decided then and there the time had come to join him. Maybe she thought she could help him save some of that gold he was forever digging out of one hole and sinking in another. Mother was true Scandinavian, and she'd been brought up to believe it was a woman's duty to make a home for her man, even if she had to go to the North Pole to be with him.

Sometimes I think a person's memory is like a yellowed scrapbook, with some of the pages missing and others too faded to read and a few still as sharp as yesterday. All I recall about our seven-day train trip to the Coast is the scoldings and spankings I got because I was too shy and self-conscious to tell Mother when I had to "go." I would wriggle and squirm on the red plush seat until in exasperation Mother would take me by the hand and hustle me to the little room at the end of the car. Sometimes she would just open the door and push me in, and I would wonder how to get out of there again without everyone in the car seeing me.

I was as glad as Mother when we finally got to Seattle and we could go to a hotel and spruce up. I can still see Mother leaning far out of the window of the Northern Hotel, shaking the dust from her seven-

gored skirt over First Avenue. We found Seattle full of stragglers coming back from the Nome gold rush, most of them flat broke. Mother kept asking them if they knew Father, but every other person in Alaska seemed to be named Nelson in those days.

We finally got passage on the S. S. *Senator* in late October, the last sailing of the season. No sooner had we passed through the Strait of Juan de Fuca than we got the full force of the North Pacific fall gales. The gray sky dropped like a curtain over the heaving black sea, and the steamer rolled and pitched endlessly as it pounded northward. Mother took to her bunk for the entire ten days and nights of the voyage. She was too miserable even to worry about me, but I had the time of my life running around the slippery decks and getting acquainted with the other passengers.

My special friend was a lady who told me her name was Toodles. She was almost as beautiful as Mother but in a different way. She had a long ostrich feather boa around her neck, and her cheeks were bright pink, but the color didn't come and go like the delicate blush in Mother's cheeks. I asked Toodles if she, too, was going to Nome to meet her husband, but she said she didn't have a husband. I felt sorry for her and said I hoped some other man was waiting for her. She said she hoped there would be quite a number. She told me always to be a good little girl, and at the end of the trip she gave me a bottle of perfume for a present, but when I told Mother where I got it she made me give it back.

We were now in the Bering Sea, and instead of dark

mountains of water there were long milky-green combers. The wind grew steadily colder, coming straight off the Siberian ice pack, and the captain had to keep a sharp eye out for floating bergs. Everyone cheered when he told us we were due in Nome the next day. Mother managed to put in an appearance at breakfast, and I'd never seen her look so pretty. Her black eyes snapped with excitement. The color had returned to her cheeks and spots of crimson glowed under her baby-fine skin. She talked on and on about Dad; how he'd surely be there on the beach waiting for us. Council was only eighty miles away and he could walk to Nome if he had to. Then she would start getting nervous—he'd written that he'd try to meet the steamer, but suppose something happened? Then she would start primping in front of the mirror again. She got the giggles like a schoolgirl, and she had me laughing with her. I thought she was the most beautiful, wonderful mother in the world. I wished she would be happy like this all the time, and maybe I wouldn't get spanked for silly things like waiting too long to go to the little room at the end of the train.

We crowded onto the scow like cattle, the women in the center and the men on the outside, with a life line stretched around us and fastened to a post in each corner. As we moved slowly toward the beach, the barge rising and falling in the waves, I caught my first glimpse of Nome between the legs of a sailor in front of me. From my father's letters, I'd expected a magic city whose streets were paved with gold, shining in the sun like a fairy story, but all I could see was

a flat gray stretch of sand with little shacks like packing boxes scattered helter-skelter along it, and an ugly blanket of soft-coal smoke hanging low over everything. I was so disappointed I felt like crying, but I didn't want Mother to know.

We saw hundreds of men on the beach as we drew nearer, and Mother scanned the faces quickly for a glimpse of Dad, but all the men had whiskers and looked alike. The bow rose again on a long swell, and the barge scotted forward, landing on the sand in a crash of foam. They laid a long plank to the beach, but most of the men were too impatient and they jumped into the shallow surf and splashed ashore. Toodles was one of the first ladies off the scow. Several men greeted her. She laughed, linked arms with one of them, and they walked away. I looked up at Mother, standing there all alone.

I guess even before we stepped ashore she knew that Father wasn't going to meet us. She didn't even look around. She took me by one hand, gathered her long skirt with the other, and we hurried across the sand through heaps of filth toward the boardwalk. She wasn't going to wait there, feeling deserted and ashamed, with strangers staring at her. Her lips were pressed tight, and when I asked her where Dad was, she snapped, "Never mind!" She rushed me past piles of garbage, tin cans, broken bottles, some dead eider ducks and the bloated carcass of a big dog, holding her head high as we walked and acting as if she had some very important business in town. I had to trot to keep up with her.

A teamster held back his horses as we started across Front Street, ankle deep in mud. A second freight wagon came from the other direction, its cursing driver cracking his whip at a pack of fierce Malemutes who snapped at the horses' heels. Mother screamed and grabbed me up in her arms as a blood-smeared dog ran ki-yi-ing past us and was suddenly pulled down by the other dogs and buried under the snarling pack. A storekeeper was prying the lid off a packing box filled with rubber boots and heavy underwear. He waded into the tangle, swinging his iron pinch bar to clear a path, while Mother scrambled up onto the rickety boardwalk.

Nome in 1902 was nothing but a jumble of flimsy false-fronted buildings, half of them saloons. There didn't seem to be room on the boardwalk for another person. A bearded giant was smashing crates into kindling, and we had to climb over the pile. Another man was using the middle of the sidewalk to flatten out empty five-gallon cans for tin roofing. The choking fumes of coal smoke mixed with the rancid odors from the restaurants and the rank smell of unwashed miners, ripe from months out on the creeks. Once Mother stopped in her tracks when she heard some prospectors talking in Swedish, but they crowded past her before she could hear what they were saying.

The men seemed to be of every nationality—Scandinavians, Russians, Greeks, Poles, Germans, French Canadians, even Chinese. Many of them were carrying duffel bags and valises, hurrying to catch the steamer we'd just left and get out of Nome before freeze-up.

The only person I saw who really belonged in that part of the world looked the most out of place. She was a dumpy Eskimo squaw, shuffling down the center of the muddy street in a pair of droopy red underdrawers and a fur parka. A runny-nosed baby was riding a sling on her back, and smiled at me as we passed. I thought what a cute baby it would make if Mother could take it home and wash it the way she did me.

Mother marched into the lobby of the largest hotel in Nome, the three-story Golden Gate. The clerk told her she was in luck—a room had just been vacated by a prospector who had saved enough gold dust to go Outside and join his family. Mother's lips drew tighter at that. She took the key in silence and led me upstairs to our room, where she began to pace the floor, tapping a knuckle against her teeth the way she always did when she was upset. There was a look in her dark eyes that warned me not to ask any more questions.

There was a kerosene lamp with a smoke-rimed chimney, and a card of sulphur matches beside it, but Mother made no move to strike one. Through the window I could see the lights flickering on all over town, in the stores and little homes. I wondered if there were any other children of my age in Alaska and if I would have someone to play with.

It was too dark to see from the window any more, and I was beginning to be frightened. I'd never seen Mother quite like this. Her nervous pacing slowed down, and I heard her catch her breath once or twice. I wanted to comfort her and have her love me, but I

didn't know what to say. Besides, I was getting hungry, and maybe if I cried something might happen, because I'd tried this before and it usually worked. Even a spanking would be better than all this silence, but for some reason I couldn't squeeze a tear. Just when I thought I couldn't stand it another minute, there was a timid knock. I knew Mother was too proud and hurt to answer, so I ran and opened the door before she could stop me.

A man was standing in the hallway. I guessed right away he was not my father. Mother had told me Dad was tall; this man was very short and roly-poly. He had a large box of candy with the fanciest cover I had ever seen, and he handed it to me, saying, "I bet you're little Klondy." My mother whirled suddenly when he said my name. He took off his floppy old felt hat, walked over to her and pumped her hand up and down, talking very fast. He apologized for not having spruced up and said he probably must look like a damn old shovel stiff to a beautiful lady just arriving in Alaska from the big Outside, but dammit, that's exactly what he was and he didn't want her to think for one minute he was one of them damn tinhorn gamblers floating around town. He was a shovel stiff, yes, Mrs. Nelson, and he was proud of it. He said his name was Blueberry Pete, he'd just mushed in from Council and he was going to the States on this last boat, to Californy, Arizony or even Floridy; to the hottest damn spot there was so he could thaw out his bones and fill his belly with something green for a change. He stopped all at once because he probably realized

that wasn't exactly the thing to say to somebody who would have to stay here, and to cover his embarrassment he reached in his pocket and pulled out a leather sack. "Mebbe you'd like to see a poke of matched nuggets."

Mother tried to get him back on the subject by saying that Father had already sent us some nuggets from Alaska, but he insisted on opening the poke, taking out a big one and giving it to me. "Don't lose it, now, Klondy," he told me. "Your Dad and I panned a lot of gravel to find this."

Mother said quickly, "Then you know Warren?"

"Know him?" Blueberry Pete looked surprised. "Sure I know him. He's my partner, and a damn good one, too. Why, him and me have been together since . . ."

Mother cut in, "Where is he now?"

"Back working the claim on Ophir Creek," Blueberry Pete said. "He didn't dast leave, account of all them claim jumpers snooping around, so he said to tell ya to take the first stage out of Nome and he'd be waitin' for ya there. Damn, I 'most forgot." He reached in his pocket again and pulled out a crumpled envelope. "He sent ya a letter."

Mother lit the lamp on the dresser. As she looked at the familiar handwriting, I saw her face soften, and a tender, far-off look came into her eyes. She read the letter through, and then started it all over again, as though she couldn't bear to stop reading. Blueberry Pete shifted from one foot to the other, finally backed toward the door and mumbled, "I guess I gotta go."

Impulsively Mother threw her arms around him and kissed him on his chubby cheek. He stared at her for a moment, stunned, and then bolted down the hall. I don't think he stopped running till he got on the steamer to Seattle.

That night before Mother went to bed she cleaned the smoky lamp, lighted it again, and placed her curling iron across the beaded chimney top. While the iron was warming she repacked her bags, smoothed out her best dress, and then sat down in the yellow lamplight, her face radiant, to read the letter through once more. She was so absorbed that she forgot all about the iron. When she tested it with her wet finger tip it fairly sizzled, and she had to wait for it to cool before she could curl her hair. Mother's hair was light brown, fine as silk but not very thick around the temples, and she would curl it in tight rings and fluff it out to make it look fuller. She had a small birthmark at the nape of her neck that used to turn fiery red when she was angry or excited, and I learned to use it for a danger signal sometimes.

I lay there watching her until she blew out the lamp and got into bed with me. She put her arms around me and I snuggled close, and she talked on and on about Dad, explaining how he couldn't possibly have come to meet us with those bad claim jumpers around. He showed very good judgment to stay, and anyway it didn't make any difference because we were going to start for Ophir Creek the very next day. We would ride in a horse-drawn stagecoach, just like the one

back in Blacktail Gulch, and in no time at all I would see my dad.

Deep in my own heart I wasn't so sure about this. Looking out the window that afternoon I'd seen the horses hauling their heavy drays and struggling in the mud, the drivers lashing them with blacksnake whips. It wasn't much like South Dakota, where the roads were hard and dusty and we could see the beautiful trees of the Black Hills. But I didn't want to worry her, because I was afraid she might stop talking, and it was times like this I liked most. Finally she laughed and said we'd better catch some sleep so we could get an early start next morning.

The piano was still pounding downstairs and heavy boots were clumping up and down the hall when my mother awakened me. It was pitch-dark, and at first I thought it must be the middle of the night, but by the time we finished dressing there was gray daylight outside and the lamps around town were going out one by one. We carried our bags down to the lobby, and Mother asked the hotel clerk when the first stage was leaving for Ophir Creek. He seemed surprised.

"Depends how soon the weather turns cold and we get a freeze-up," he said. "This time of year you got to travel along the Bering Sea, and you can't start until the ice is thick enough to hold the stage."

Mother looked out at the endless expanse of rolling green waves. "You mean we've got to wait until the whole ocean freezes over?"

"That could happen overnight, ma'am, once the weather turns sharp," the clerk said. "Then, with good

luck, in a week or ten days you ought to hit Council."

She collapsed suddenly on a bench. "But we're going to Ophir Creek!"

"Stage only goes as far as Council, ma'am," the clerk explained. "You'll have to make it by dog team from there."

So we waited for the freeze-up. Day after day Mother sat by the window, watching the snow line slowly creeping down the distant slopes of the Sawtooth Mountains. Each morning the hills looked a little whiter, the Bering Sea breakers grew more sluggish with ice, and Mother would tell me, "Maybe tomorrow or the next day." Sometimes she would stroll downstairs to the hotel lobby, very straight and neat, in a tight-waisted dress that showed off her fine figure. The swirl of her full black skirt, as she descended the staircase, would reveal a smooth round calf above her high-buttoned shoe. Grimy prospectors back from lonely months on the tundra, hungry for the company of a fresh and pretty woman, would hesitate and look at her with longing in their eyes, but something about her made them go on their way.

At noon we would walk down Front Street to a crowded restaurant. Clean-up time was over at the mines, the muck and gravel in the sluice boxes had yielded the payoff, and prospectors with fat gold pokes crowded into town, making for the saloons and gambling halls. The largest saloon in Nome was the Northern, and once as we passed it I glimpsed a paint-

ing over the bar, a large woman who didn't seem to have any clothes on. Every time we went by the Northern I tried to see more as the door swung back and forth. One day I had my chance when Mother stopped to glance into a store window. I slipped her hand and ran back. A man and a woman were just going through the doors, and I recognized Toodles. I called to her, but she didn't hear me. She went inside and I followed her.

The room was crowded with rough-looking men standing around the piano or sitting at green-covered tables playing cards. They all turned to stare at me and began to laugh. A quiet man in a wide-brimmed Stetson hat and gray chamois vest with a nugget chain walked over and asked me what I wanted. He said he was the owner, his name was Tex Rickard, and I was probably the youngest customer he'd ever had. I told him I was looking for my friend, Toodles. Just then she rushed toward me and grabbed my arm. She didn't say hello or anything. She yanked me out through the swinging doors, knelt beside me and hugged me, saying in a low voice, "Listen, young lady, I never want to see you in there again."

She didn't get a chance to say any more, because I heard quick steps behind me. Mother never even spoke to Toodles, just marched me straight back to the hotel. I tried to explain that Toodles was my friend, but I noticed the birthmark on Mother's neck was bright red. The worst of it was that I never did get a good look at the painting over the bar.

Winter was closing in fast. People were boarding

up their windows and chinking all the cracks. Each day the carpenters were finding it harder to work. The cold rain turned to sheets of ice on the lumber, and they would have to stop now and then, blow on their fingers and swing their arms. The Sawtooth Mountains were completely snow-covered now, even the tops of the foothills behind town were dusted white, and the white whales, who had been stuffing themselves on tomcods in the slushy surf off Nome, were all gone when I looked out the window one morning. The shorter the days and darker the nights, the brighter Mother's eyes would get. Every night before we went to sleep she would whisper to me, "It can't be long now, Klondy."

One Saturday night Mother took me to an amateur minstrel show. What I remember best was Mr. Bones, a broad-shouldered young man in blackface, dressed in a baggy jacket with oyster crackers for buttons, and a necklace of Bering Sea spider crabs. While he was telling a joke he would chew casually on a crab leg or eat one of his buttons. The climax was a parody of "The Holy City," a popular revival song of the time. When he came to the chorus of "Jerusalem, Jerusalem," he changed it to "He's losin' 'em, he's losin' 'em," and his floppy pants fell down around his ankles as he hobbled off the stage. I laughed until the tears ran down my face.

Mother heard that the young man had been in Council. After the show, she went up to him and asked if he had known my father. He was very polite and handsome, too, with the charcoal washed off his face.

"Warren Nelson?" he said to Mother, and smiled. "Why, we came down the Yukon together on the same boat. He's a real stampeder. When you see him, be sure to tell him hello from Rex Beach."

Now the rivers were locked from bank to bank, and the deep ruts in Front Street had frozen solid, preserving the prints of horse tracks and calked boots. Blasts of screaming wind from the north ended the rains, and the snow came. Overnight, soot-colored Nome was white. The ugly piles of garbage on the beach became beautiful velvety mounds. All night long we could hear the groaning and creaking as the ice pack moved in from the Arctic Ocean, and piled in hummocks against the shore.

Mother hummed to herself that night as she packed. Tomorrow we would start the last leg of our journey. At last I would see my dad.

We were on the trail twelve hours the first day and we only made fourteen miles, but the stage driver said it was a good day's travel. His name was Mr. Brower and he sat all alone on a high seat behind six horses, with the lapels of his big horsehide coat turned up and the earlaps of his cap tied under his chin. He had a long bony face and deep-set eyes, and all I could think of was a horse's skull.

There weren't any roads after we passed Fort Davis, and the horses wallowed up to their bellies in snow-drifts. The stage kept slipping sideways and righting itself with wrenching jolts. I was aching all over by the time we stopped in front of the Cape Nome Road-

house. All the bunks were taken. The passengers had to spread their blanket rolls on the floor, but Mrs. Wrigley, the owner's wife, made her husband sleep on the floor with the other men and invited Mother and me to share her double bed. The mattress felt as though it was stuffed with willow bushes, but later we realized how lucky we were. It was the only real bed we had on the whole trip.

The stars were still shining when we started out the next morning, working our way down the coast past Safety and Solomon, south of Big Hurrah. At Bluff the steep cliffs rose several hundred feet. To get around them we had to head across the frozen Bering Sea. We were a mile or so offshore when I heard a splintering crash. The stage stopped so suddenly that I slid off the wooden box I was sitting on. Mr. Brower was shouting at the top of his lungs, and his black-snake whip cracked like pistol shots. One of the passengers opened the stagecoach door for a look, and yelled excitedly for everyone to pile out of the stage quick; the lead horses had gone through the ice.

Mother and I scrambled onto a hummock, and stared at the black, jagged hole in the ice. The two front horses were floundering in the running sea, their heads rearing up and disappearing again as they churned the water in panic. Mr. Brower chopped them loose from the rest of the team and held onto their reins, tugging and lashing their bobbing heads with his whip. He was yelling so loud that his voice broke, and his high-pitched scream sounded like the trumpeting of the horses.

Their flailing hoofs struck the edge of the hole, breaking off a chunk of ice, and Mr. Brower leaped back and lost the reins. He turned deliberately, climbed up to his driver's seat, and pulled something out from under the pad. Mother yanked me into the stage and held my head against her breast, and I heard two sharp sounds like whip cracks, only louder. Pretty soon we began to move again. The passengers took turns walking ahead, banging the ice with an ax to test it, and the next time we stopped to rest the horses, I noticed there were only four.

Mr. Brower beckoned to me, and helped me up onto the seat beside him. We rode in silence for a while, until suddenly he said to me, "Guess you think I was pretty ha'd about them hosses." It was the first time he'd spoken, and I didn't know what to say. "I can't let myself git to like 'em." He talked through his nose like a New Englander. "If I ever git to like 'em," he said, "then it's ha'der when I got to do what I just done." Maybe he felt he'd admitted too much, because he stopped the stage and set me down on the ice again. I got inside and he never said another word to me the whole trip.

The wind was whistling louder and louder, and Mother insisted she could feel the ice heaving under the stage. By the time we reached the far shore, the air seethed with flying snow that blotted out everything around us. Somehow Mr. Brower fought his way through the blizzard to Shovel Creek. There were forty miners holed up in the roadhouse, all sleeping on a split-log floor in one big room. They found

an iron cot for Mother and me, and hung gunny sacks around it for a curtain.

The coarse blankets hadn't been washed for months, let alone the miners, and we almost choked on the smell of damp socks drying around the hundred-gallon oil-drum stove in the center of the room. Mother got the giggles listening to all the different snores from forty sagging jaws, but I lay there worrying how I would ever find my way through all those men lying on the floor around me if I had to "go" during the night. I began to think longingly of that little room at the end of the train.

We were marooned at Shovel Creek for three days when Mr. Brower announced that he was getting low on horse feed and would make a break for it. The rest of us could come along if we wanted to. All the passengers decided to take a chance rather than stay cooped up in that one foul room any longer. We climbed the divide to the Niukluk River, but the blizzard was worse on top, and we could barely see the struggling team ahead of us. The ridges crisscrossed and led off in every direction, so we had no idea where we were. Finally Mr. Brower stopped the stage and walked back and opened the door. "We're stoppin' here for the night," he said briefly.

In the stage there was a coal stove on which we made coffee and heated some canned food. We even dozed off a little, but Mr. Brower was up all night, keeping his four horses covered with blankets, feeding them oats and baled hay, melting buckets of snow on the stove to give them water. At daybreak the wind

dropped, and the swirling snow parted for a moment. Less than a hundred feet ahead of where we'd stopped was the edge of a sheer cliff.

It took us ten days to reach Council. A team of shaggy dogs was tied to a post beside the Miller House as our stage pulled up. An enormous man in a spotted reindeer parka and hip-length sealskin mukluks lurched through the hotel door, stumbling across the sidewalk toward us. "Anything for Ophir Creek?" he shouted to Mr. Brower. Mother stepped out of the stage with a smile, assuming that he had come to meet us, but he reached past her and picked up the wooden box that I'd been sitting on. I noticed he swayed a little, and his breath was strong. "You're three days late," he growled to Mr. Brower.

Mother grabbed his sleeve. "I'm Warren Nelson's wife."

"Thought you might be," the man grunted, staggering toward the dog sled with the box. "He's been wondering where you were. I'm Big Hans."

Mother tagged after him. "Well, do you have any objections if we ride back to Ophir Creek with you?"

"Not if you're ready to start right now," Big Hans said. "I got to get going. Spent enough money already, hanging around town, waiting for this box to come." He pried open the top with a hatchet, lifted out one of the straw-covered jugs inside and took a long swig. "Climb in," he said to me, hammering the cover back on the box. "You can sit on this."

The sled was so narrow I had to wedge myself between Mother's knees. We were bundled in fur robes,

and Big Hans lent me an extra pair of mitts. Each mitt was made of a wolf's head, with the ears still on and green beads sewed around the slanting eyes. They were so big I could cram my fists into the thumbs. Big Hans stepped onto the sled runners behind us, took another swig from the jug and tucked it carefully in the robes behind Mother's head. He gave a yank on the snubbing line and yelled, "Mush!"

We didn't go very fast at first. The team panted and toiled up a long hill, their bushy tails dragging. Big Hans complained that it was an awful big load for just six dogs; maybe he ought to lighten it by taking another drink. I could feel Mother stiffen, but there was nothing she could say. We reached the top of the hill, and the dogs began picking up speed. Everywhere I looked there was nothing but snow and silence. It seemed like the end of the world. I wondered how we'd ever find Father's cabin in all this whiteness.

The sled was traveling faster and faster on the hard-packed drifts along the ridgetop, and Big Hans hung onto the handlebars to keep it from tipping over. The dogs had their bushy tails curled over their backs now, and were galloping at top speed, paying no attention to Big Hans' commands. Just then a flock of snow-white ptarmigan thundered into the air in front of the leader's nose, and the whole team bolted off the trail. The next thing I knew I was tumbling through space. I caught one glimpse of the capsized sled, with Mother still clinging to the side. I didn't stop rolling until I hit some glare ice at the bottom of the gully,

and slid into a soft snowbank that buried me almost out of sight.

Big Hans stumbled down the slope toward me, falling down and hauling himself up again and swearing. I held up my arms to be lifted, but he floundered right past me and began kicking around in the drifts. I heard Mother screaming to him, "There she is. Right behind you."

"I know where she is," Big Hans snarled, pawing at the snow. "I'm looking for my jug!"

We were no sooner back in the sled than the dogs started racing again, barking and yapping so loud that Big Hans had to cup his hands for Mother to hear. "Don't worry, Mrs. Nelson," he yelled. "It's smoke. They can smell it a mile away." The dogs were going downhill so fast it was like flying. I turned around to see if Big Hans was still there on the runners. The snow spurting from the brake under his foot reminded me of a white rooster's tail. I looked ahead again, and there was a black stovepipe sticking out of the snow, with smoke curling out of it. Big Hans hit the brake hard, and shouted, "Here we are!"

I could feel Mother's knees trembling against me, and all of a sudden, like magic, a man came up out of the snow. He was wearing a buffalo coat and a black Homburg hat, and was smoking a big cigar. He grabbed Mother and lifted her in his arms as if she was no bigger than I. She said, "Warren, Warren!" and he pressed her closer, almost smothering her in the curly buffalo hair.

In my excitement I got all tangled up in the robes

and ropes, and Big Hans had to help me out of the sled. I guess I was the only one who noticed him drive away. I thought Mother and Dad would never stop hugging and kissing, beside the smoking stovepipe. Finally my dad saw me, put Mother down and lifted me instead, swinging me high over his head.

"The last time I held you, Klondy," he laughed, "you were just a little red-faced crying brat."

He smelled so nice and clean, not like those men in the roadhouse, and his face was smooth except for a mustache. When he kissed me, I could feel it tickle. He set me down again, put his arm around Mother's waist and said, "Come on, Alma, and see your new home."

I had no idea where we were going, but my dad lifted up a board and parted a pair of gunny sacks hanging behind it. There was a steep tunnel leading down under the snow. He helped Mother descend the six or seven steps to the cabin door, but I couldn't wait. I sat on my coattails and slid right past them, like Alice entering the rabbit hole, right through the chute into Wonderland.

Two

There's a story about Alaska that my father liked to tell. I can see him now, sitting on a case of canned goods in our little cabin on Ophir Creek with a cigar

clamped between the shrunken fingers of his crippled left hand. It seems this old prospector died and went to Heaven, but St. Peter wouldn't throw open the pearly gates. Heaven was too full of prospectors already, St. Peter told him. They'd torn up all the streets with their picks and shovels, and they were even eyeing the Golden Throne. The old prospector promised St. Peter that if he'd let him in he'd guarantee to have all the other prospectors out of there by morning.

Dad would pause a moment and signal my mother to fill up the coffee mugs of the other miners who had dropped in. He loved to play the generous host, and he would pull his pockets inside out for any shovel stiff who needed a grubstake. Nobody could ever buy when he was around.

St. Peter took a chance, Dad would go on, and that night when the old prospector ran into some of his partners he told them about a brand-new strike in Hell. "Everybody's hitting the jackpot down there"—my father's own eyes would light up when he got to this part—"there's places where you can ladle out pure molten gold." Well, the next morning when St. Peter looked out he saw all the miners filing through the pearly gates, carrying their picks and shovels. Hustling right along behind them came the old prospector with his gold pan. "Where are you going?" St. Peter asked him.

"I'm going to Hell," the old prospector admitted. "There may be something to that rumor, after all."

My father would lean back and laugh as he finished,

and Mother would smile, too, but there would be a penetrating look in her black eyes. "Did you ever stop to think, Warren," she asked him once, "that the old prospector could be you?"

He never fooled her, I guess. He was always chasing rumors, always deserting his family to look for a pot of gold just over the next hill. He was a braggart, he was a liar, he squandered all his money on every new stampede. Years later, after Dad had left us for good, Mother confessed that my grandmother in Sweden had willed me a substantial legacy when she died, and he had borrowed it all for another grubstake. She insisted that he was just trying to make more money for me; she always defended him. He was searching for something all his life, something he would never find because it was only in his heart, and she understood him and loved him.

He was all attention that first night we arrived at Ophir Creek. He made Mother sit in the only chair while he got dinner, so he could just look at her, he said, and I squatted on the floor and stared at him. I was trying to get used to the idea of having a father. He was courtly and gallant, blue-eyed like a Viking, with his dashing cavalier mustache twisted to little points.

He brought in a flour sack filled with frozen beans—Alaska strawberries, he called them—and dumped some of them into a skillet on the Yukon stove. He had to step over a clutter of boxes and crates in the center of the floor, and Mother looked at them dubiously.

"They all go back under the bed in the morning," he assured her. "The fire dies down during the night, and things like potatoes and canned goods freeze if they're left too near the wall." Her eyes kept roaming around the tiny cabin, trying to reconcile it with his glowing letters about the fortune he'd struck here in Ophir Creek. Perhaps he sensed what was in her mind, because he explained quickly that of course it was only a little place but we'd start building a real home right after clean-up in the spring. The gold was right at the grass roots, he said; you could scratch it up with your fingernails. Mother said it was being together at last that mattered.

"Anyway, the cabin is nice and cozy," she said. "I'm just itching to fix it up."

I thought Father would burst with happiness. He beamed at her and rocked back and forth with his feet spread apart. He took out a big cigar, hesitated a moment and then asked Mother if she minded his smoking. "Now, Warren," she began, "you know what those cigars do to your hand."

"Just one," Dad wheedled, "to celebrate tonight." He lighted it quickly, and as he did his eyes met mine, and I couldn't help smiling because I realized we had something in common. I had a few tricks of my own I used when I wanted to get around Mother.

I hadn't really noticed his hand until Mother mentioned it, and I was curious. His left hand was bigger than the right one, at least the heel part of it, but the wrist was hardly any larger around than a shovel

handle and the fingers were cramped up. Later on, Mother told me he'd been hurt playing with dynamite when he was a boy in Sweden.

Dad could be quite a baby about his hand. He loved to smoke big black cigars, but if he smoked too many his hand would swell and he would be off to bed with his arm in a sling. Mother would tie a cord to the ceiling and hoist up the hand so it wouldn't swell any worse. She nursed him day and night, keeping the tea-kettle singing on the stove for hot packs and water bottles. If she came near him he would twist and groan, and sometimes pull the whole apparatus down. But sooner or later, he would suddenly remember an important engagement somewhere. He'd start off with a limp, forgetting for a minute it was his hand that was supposed to hurt, but as soon as he thought he was out of sight, the limp would disappear and his hand would start swinging and he would light another cigar. That hand got to be a kind of barometer after a while. Whenever he was trying to get up nerve enough to tell Mother he was leaving home and starting on a new stampede, he would puff on one cigar after another, and his hand would swell, and Mother would brace herself for the worst.

That first night I dallied as long as I could over supper, but it was getting late, and Dad said he thought it was time for bed. I got very busy examining things around the cabin. Mother said, "Klondy, didn't you hear what your father told you?" and I said, "Yes, Mo-th-er," making three syllables out of the word, but she gave me a warning flash with her eyes, and I knew

I couldn't stall any longer. But I did manage to take quite a while with the strings of my felt shoes.

Dad picked me up in his strong arms and carried me over to a small cot across the cabin from the big double bed. I tried to explain to him that I always slept in the same bed with my mother, but he tucked me in the wool blankets and whispered that I'd been with Mother for five long years and didn't I think it was his turn now? Then he kissed me and his mustache tickled, and he promised he would buy me a reindeer fawnskin parka and a pair of sealskin mukluks, and I could be his little Eskimo girl. He never got around to buying them for me, though. I asked him if there were any other children around to play with, and he said, "No, I guess you're the only one."

Mother gasped, "Oh, Warren!"

He blew out the lamp and then the big bed creaked, but I couldn't go to sleep. I felt scared and alone. I heard Mother giggle and ask Dad if he'd scratch her back. Now I felt more lonely than ever, because every night when Mother took off her corsets she would ask me to scratch her back. When I didn't hit the right spot she'd say, "No, Klondy, over there, now up a little more," and finally she'd say, "Oh, never mind," and get her long stick with a small hand on the end, and do the job herself. Then I knew what Dad's left hand reminded me of. It was Mother's Chinese back-scratcher. I felt so sorry for myself that I started crying. Dad must have heard me because he came over and picked me up and put me in the bed between them, saying, "I know just how you feel." I snuggled

down and went to sleep. But when I woke up in the morning, I was back in my own cot again.

Dad was shaking the stove, and Mother was sitting up in bed complaining sleepily about ashes flying all over the place. He filled a tin wash basin from the water barrel. He set it on the stove, and put on a pot of coffee. He looked funny with his big buffalo coat over his long underwear, and unbuckled arctics flapping on his feet. He pushed the boxes and crates back under the bed, tested the water in the wash basin with his finger, then cupped his hands and sloshed it over his face, snorting and sputtering. He dumped the water into a slop bucket beside the stove and filled the basin again with fresh water, telling Mother and me to wait until the cabin was a little warmer. Then he went out the door, letting in a blast of frigid air. Soon I heard a light tap against the window and I saw a block of snow slide away on a shovel, and a shaft of sunshine lighted the cabin.

The whole room wasn't any bigger than my own little upstairs bedroom back in Blacktail Gulch. The bare logs were chinked with gray reindeer moss, and everything was hanging from nails—mackinaw jackets, rubber hip boots, snowshoes and a shotgun over the door. The only picture was a 1902 calendar with a painting of some bears robbing a tent, "Compliments of Dempsey's Saloon, Council." All the days had been X'ed out with a black crayon up to November 16, yesterday.

Dad came back with an armload of wood, dumped it behind the stove, and began stirring batter for

sourdough hotcakes. By the time Mother and I were washed and dressed, there was a smoking heap of them on my plate. I covered them with syrup from a tin can that looked like a little house, and finished the whole stack. Dad grinned to Mother. "I guess Alaska agrees with her."

Right after breakfast he took two five-gallon cans with wire handles, and a wooden yoke, and announced that he was going down to the creek, where he kept a hole chopped open all winter.

"We've got to be careful with water," he warned. "Every drop we use has to be lugged up the hill, and after it's dumped in the slop can it's all got to be lugged outdoors again."

Mother was surveying the cluttered cabin. Her eyes came to rest on the open slop bucket, plastered with grease and coffee grounds and half full of dirty gray water. "I'll have to do something about that right off," she muttered to herself.

Dad grinned at me. "Come on, get into this squirrel-skin parka of mine," he said, "and I'll show you where Santa Claus lives."

The parka sleeves dragged on the floor, and I stepped on the hem when I tried to walk. Dad carried me up the steep steps into daylight. The whole valley was dazzling bright and I couldn't see anything at first. Here and there, all around me, other stovepipes like ours were sticking out of the snow. A little ways off, a dark figure popped up out of nowhere, like a gopher coming out of its burrow, and a half-dozen mounds of snow suddenly came to life,

stood up and shook themselves. "That's Big Hans feeding his dogs," said Dad. He pointed to the hill-top, dotted with green spruce tops showing above the drifts.

"See the Christmas trees, Klondy? Santa Claus lives just over there on the other side of the hill. If you look hard, you can see his reindeer."

I strained my eyes and sure enough, I could see some tiny deer with spreading antlers, so far off they looked like toys, walking around and pawing at the snow. "Santa has some Lapp herders taking care of them," Dad explained. Maybe he thought I was worried about being the only child in Ophir Creek, because he added quickly, "See how lucky you are, Klondy? Santa Claus will stop here even before he goes on to Council or Nome. You'll be the first little girl in the whole world to get a look at his pack."

I didn't mind not having any other children around. There were a million things to do, and I hated the hours I had to spend indoors helping Mother straighten up the cabin. The first thing she tackled was the slop bucket, as she had threatened, but that was one battle Mother lost. At the start she tried covering it with a freshly washed flour sack, but the cloth would sag in the center and fall into the greasy water, and she would have to heat more water to wash the sack. Next she used the top of a butter keg for a cover, but that meant lifting it off again each time, and usually she had both hands full carrying the dishpan. She even put a milk crate upside down over it, but Dad stumbled and spilled the whole

mess on the floor, and Mother sat down and cried. It was the first and last time I ever saw her give up. After that, the slop bucket stayed in plain sight, and Mother said we'd have to get used to it.

Everything else in the cabin was made spic-and-span. The heavy parkas and Dad's buffalo coat and Homburg hat were hung behind the door. His felt boots and mukluks were stacked neatly in a corner. All the washing—socks and long underwear and my daily change of bloomers—was draped over a wire rack above the stove. Mother nailed empty egg crates to the wall for kitchen cupboards, and covered them with curtains of sugar sacks. The pictures of the brands were decorations. She even found time to make me a rag doll out of one of Dad's old socks. It had shoebuttons for eyes, and the frizzled drawstrings from the sugar sacks made its kinky hair. I loved that doll and played with it as if it were a real baby, but whenever I heard Mother or Dad coming I flung it aside and pretended to be doing something else. Years later my own daughter played with it until she finally wore it out.

I remember the day Mother's steamer trunk finally arrived. She unpacked all the dainty clothes she had brought from Sweden, lace shirtwaists with mutton-leg sleeves and needlework aprons and frilly petticoats and bits of velvet ribbon, and sat and looked at them for a long time. She saved out the white satin gown she'd been married in, folded it carefully and put it back in the trunk. Then she quietly set about ripping the rest of her trousseau into strips, and sew-

ing them together to make bedspreads and pillow covers.

A change had come over Mother. I could sense it even then, at the age of five. I had worried about her and tried to take care of her on the long trip to Alaska, but now all at once I could see she was able to take care of herself. She looked as fragile and delicate as Swedish blown glass, but she was made of harder stuff. She had the courage of all the pioneer women who followed their men to the frontier North. Some of them faltered and turned back; others, like my mother, stayed on, adapted themselves to the rugged life and came to love it. They turned a wilderness of brawling gold camps into a decent land of schools and churches and homes. My mother was as strong in her own way as my dad. In some ways, as it turned out, she was even stronger.

Word spread fast that a woman had come to live on Ophir Creek. The other miners made all sorts of excuses to detour past our cabin and drop in for some of Mother's dried-apple pie or *fattigmand* cookies or Swedish fruit soup made with raisins, prunes and figs, thickened with tapioca. They would sit around sipping her coffee, paying compliments until her eyes would dance with pleasure. Dad would brag about Mother's cooking, but now and then I caught him glancing at her jealously.

Mother could never understand how the word spread so fast whenever she made a new batch of doughnuts. "I swear, Klondy," she said, "they can smell them ten miles away." I didn't tell her that each

noon, when I carried a hot lunch to Father at his windlass on the creek bench, I would drop a little hint to the men who were working with him. I got to be almost as popular as Mother.

We had our first company on Thanksgiving. The nearest woman neighbor was a Mrs. Alvina Morrow, who lived seven miles away on Melsing Creek, and Dad invited Mr. and Mrs. Morrow to come for Thanksgiving dinner. There wasn't any turkey, of course, but Dad solved that by buying a frozen Emperor goose from some Eskimos. Mother decided, as a special treat, to make a pot of Swedish *glug*. She had the prunes and raisins, but there was no stick cinnamon, so she tied some powdered cinnamon in a piece of flour sack. Big Hans brought a package of cardamon seed from Leslie's Store in Council, and also a bottle of claret from Dempsey's Saloon. Mother heated it all on the stove, added some rum at the last minute, and the wonderful smell filled the cabin on Thanksgiving morning.

It was sunny and clear when the Morrows started out on foot from their cabin, walking on the hard-packed snow over the top of the divide between the two creeks; but the temperature began to drop fast, and a little wind sprang up. It whipped the snow off the drifts, stinging their faces like sand, and they had to turn their heads and fight against it. Mr. Morrow kept urging his wife to go faster, but she was tired and cold and lagged farther and farther behind. Finally she sat down on the snow and said she couldn't go another step. Mr. Morrow knew what that could

mean at ten below zero, so he yanked her to her feet and slapped her face to make her go on. Every time she faltered, he slapped her face again. He kept yanking her and slapping her face all the way to our cabin. By the time they arrived she was so mad she wasn't speaking to him. They never said a word to each other all through Thanksgiving dinner.

To make things worse, the temperature continued to drop all afternoon. Father's thermometer was a bottle filled with coal oil, hanging outside the door, and when the coal oil turned to sludge, it was at least forty below. Toward the end of the afternoon Dad went out and looked at it again. Then he came back in and shook his head. "Frozen solid," he told us grimly. "That means sixty-five or worse. You folks wouldn't last a mile if you started out now."

There was nothing for the Morrows to do but spend the night. They still weren't speaking, and when Mother said that Mrs. Morrow could sleep with her and Dad would have to roll up on the floor, Dad blamed Mr. Morrow and they stopped speaking to each other. Then Dad reached for the box of cigars the Morrows had brought him for a Thanksgiving present, and Mother said sharply that he'd had a couple already and that was enough. Mrs. Morrow asked why on earth the poor man couldn't have a cigar if he wanted one, and Mother said it was none of her business, so Mrs. Morrow stopped speaking to Mother.

They were marooned in our cabin the whole next day, and they did most of their talking through me. Mother would say, "Klondy, tell your father we need

some more wood," and Mrs. Morrow would add, "Ask Mr. Morrow why he can't get up and help him." Dad kept going out and looking at the thermometer hopefully every five minutes. Finally he came back, rubbed his hands and announced in a loud voice that the coal oil in the bottle had turned clear again. Everyone else was relieved when Mr. Morrow said to me, "Klondy, tell Mrs. Morrow to get her things," but I was sorry to see Thanksgiving come to an end, because I'd never had so much attention in my life.

Day after day the coal oil in the thermometer stayed mushy, and I was only allowed outdoors for a few minutes around noontime when the sun was up. I had to wear a muffler over my face and breathe through it, because Dad warned me that the air at that temperature might frost my lungs. The wolves howled around our cabin at night, and Mother would get up and bolt the door. It was so cold that when Dad chopped a tree the wood shattered like glass. He could have used the blunt edge of the ax almost as well.

He and the other miners were thawing prospect holes down to bedrock during the winter months. They would build a fire at the bottom of the shaft. When the frozen ground melted, they hauled it to the surface in buckets and dumped it on a heap. Since there weren't more than two or three hours of daylight, the men were glad when December 21st arrived; from now on, the days would start getting longer. But I was glad because it meant only four more days to Christmas.

Our cabin was too crowded for even the smallest

Christmas tree, so the miners suggested that we celebrate in the bunkhouse. They cut a nice spruce top and dragged it down the hill. Mother and I got busy making the decorations. We popped corn and strung it, and made ropes of cranberries, and Mother baked cooky men with curling stocking caps which could be hooked over the tree's branches. Dad asked Big Hans to look for some other trimmings on his next trip to Council. A couple of days later Big Hans showed up, reeling a little and his breath smelling of whiskey.

"Found everything I wanted in Dempsey's Saloon," he said, setting a box on the cabin floor. "No need to look further."

He opened the box proudly. There were several pieces of bright-flowered wallpaper left over when Mr. Dempsey papered his saloon— These could be rolled into cornucopias—and part of a can of gilt paint which had been used to write "Merry Christmas" on the mirror over the bar. The rest of the box was filled with old bottle corks of every size and shape.

"Just slosh a little gold on 'em," Big Hans said, "and they'll shine like real nuggets." He reached inside his shirt and produced what he boasted was the best decoration of them all. With a satisfied smile, he unrolled Dempsey's new calendar for 1903. It showed an Oriental dancing girl half clad in flimsy veils. "All you got to do is cut her out, stick on wings and a halo," Big Hans said, "and there's your angel for the top of the tree."

Mother thanked him politely, but after he left she

flattened out a baking powder tin and started cutting a star for the top of the tree instead.

Christmas Eve had to be noon, because that's all the sun there was, and it was a half-mile walk up the creek to the bunkhouse. Mother dressed me in a fancy party gown of cream-colored cashmere, and I wore mukluks over my patent leather slippers and pulled Dad's squirrel-skin parka down over my head. Mother had spent hours winding my curls around her fingers to look nice, but when I peeled off the parka the curls all pulled straight up and my blue hair ribbon came off with it. The miners were all sitting around the bunkhouse waiting for us, looking very stiff and uncomfortable. They had put on clean shirts for the occasion. Their hair was slicked down with grease, some of them had even shaved, and at first I didn't know who they were.

The Christmas tree was already lighted as I came in. Thick miner's candles wired to the branches were shining on the strings of cranberries, and the gilded corks and baking-powder star at the top. I caught my breath, it was so beautiful. The men looked at me with pleased grins and winked at each other as though they were sharing some big secret. I didn't know it at the time, but they had gone to great lengths to make sure my first Christmas at Ophir Creek was something I would never forget. They had hired one of the Lapp herders on the hill to dress up as Santa Claus and drive his team of reindeer right up onto the bunkhouse roof. They had even banked some extra snow

against the bunkhouse so his sleigh could climb the slope. There wasn't any chimney, of course, and he couldn't very well come down the stovepipe, so they had loosened a couple of boards in the roof to make a trapdoor.

I looked under the tree hopefully, but there weren't any presents. I'd prayed to Santa Claus every night, telling him the one thing I wanted was a house for my doll. I guess my lip quivered a little. One of the miners noticed and he chuckled. "Don't worry, Klondy, Santa will be showing up any minute now. Won't he, Hans?"

"By God, he better," Big Hans muttered into his beard. "That's what I paid him for."

Mother thought it might be a nice idea, while we were waiting, to have some Christmas carols. She asked me to lead the singing. One of the miners had a harmonica to sound the key, and I began with the hymn I liked best, which Mother had taught me back in South Dakota:

"Hark, the herald angels sing,
Glory to the newborn King . . ."

Mother and Dad started off with me, and one by one the other men joined in, a little sheepishly at first. Some of them mumbled, trying to remember the words, and others opened their mouths and sang unashamed. They kept stealing glances at Mother and me. I guess we made them think of their own loved ones far away, and sometimes their voices would choke

up and stop suddenly. I looked over at Big Hans. With tears running down his face, he was bellowing:

"Peace on earth and mercy mild
God and sinners reconciled . . ."

And then I heard the sound of sleighbells, way off in the distance. They came closer and closer, right up to the bunkhouse and onto the roof, and I heard the prancing of reindeer hoofs and then Santa Claus' voice: "Whoa, you yavils! Stand still!" There was a loud thumping and scraping, some snow sifted onto the floor, and a pair of Lapp reindeer boots with turned-up toes came down through the ceiling, followed by a pair of stocky legs in red woolen underwear. The legs dangled and kicked a couple of times, and I heard Santa yell again, "Queeck, coom, somebody! Ay not get t'rough dis yavilish hole!"

Several men stood on the bunkhouse table and pulled Santa Claus to the floor. He didn't look exactly like his pictures. He was wearing a white drill parka and a stocking cap, and his beard was white as cotton, but it was over on one side of his face. His eyes were small and piercing. He flung a burlap sack in front of me, and turned and stomped toward the door.

"Hey, ain't you goin' back up the chimney?" Big Hans yelled.

"Not by damn sight," Santa Claus said, and slammed the door.

I heard the thump of a ladder against the side of the bunkhouse. A moment later the sleighbells tinkled

again and faded away, heading back over the hill. One of the miners opened the sack and dumped the presents into my lap. They all stood around expectantly. There were gold nuggets, and nugget chains, and five- and ten-dollar gold pieces, and white ermine skins and beautiful arctic-fox furs—but no doll's house. I looked at the sack again, but it was empty.

I never said a word all the way home. When we arrived there, Mother took me in her lap and asked me what was the matter. Finally I told her. Dad jumped up and went over to the table, and I heard him hammering and cutting something. Then he called, "Merry Christmas, Klondy!" and I turned.

He had cut out the bottom of the maple syrup tin shaped like a house, and poked holes in the painted windows, and set it over a lighted candle. The light shone through the little openings, and real smoke was curling up from the chimney where you poured the syrup out. I sat in front of it and looked and looked. I think it was the nicest Christmas present I ever had.

Three

Spring came overnight to the Nelson family on Ophir Creek. The first twenty-six days of April had been X'ed out on the 1903 calendar from Dempsey's Saloon in Council, and lately I'd noticed the nights were getting shorter and shorter. The sunshine was blind-

ing when I climbed up the tunnel from our little cabin buried in the snow. Dad gave me a pair of Eskimo sunglasses, just a hollowed-out piece of willow wood with knife slits for eyes, and when I tied them on I could make out a few dark objects here and there in the blank white around me, the stovepipes of the neighboring cabins sticking out of the drifts, and the spruce tops, and some Lapp reindeer burrowing for lichens on the hillside.

On April 27, while Mother was frying sourdough hotcakes for breakfast, winter suddenly came to an end. All at once there was a loud commotion on the roof of the cabin, a squabbling sound and the buffeting of wings. Dad tossed me my Eskimo mukluks while Mother hurriedly pulled on her fur boots. We scrambled up the steps to the top of the snow, and Dad lifted me to see.

The sod was showing on our roof, and a dozen ptarmigan roosters were fighting for it. Their neck feathers had turned russet, in contrast to their snow-white bodies, and fiery red combs swelled above their shining black eyes. They spread their wings, ran forward like jousting knights, pecking and spurring each other with their feet, and paid no attention to us at all.

All up and down Ophir Creek the turf-covered tops of other cabins were showing, the first bare spots in the valley. Ptarmigan roosters were staging battle royals for nesting sites. I had to look close to see the white hens, crouched on the drifts and ignoring the warring roosters. All winter long the big flocks had lived together peacefully among the scrub willows, but now

spring was in the air, and the whole valley sounded like an excited chicken yard. One male would take possession of an exposed patch of sod and call pleadingly to a hen, "Come 'ere! Come 'ere!" and his throat would rattle like the roll of a snare drum. Another male would challenge him, he would lower his head and sound a guttural warning, "Go back! Go back!" and they would fly at each other, battering with their wings, sometimes leaping ten or fifteen feet into the air.

What pleased Dad most was the sight of ptarmigan fighting on the mining dump. That meant the gravel heaps were starting to thaw. Soon there would be enough snow water to start washing pay dirt through the sluice boxes. "Almost time for spring clean-up," he said to Mother, "and we'll find out how this claim pans out."

Mother darted him a quick look, because he'd promised this would be the biggest strike yet. Poor Dad put his foot into it even worse. "Don't worry, Alma," he added, "if I don't find the gold here, I'll find it somewhere else." Mother pressed her lips tight, and walked back into the cabin without a word.

Spring was happening so fast I couldn't believe it. More and more bare spots and potholes showed up every day on the tundra. Flocks of migrating birds began to appear, winging in at all hours through the bright night, and dropping down to settle in our valley.

First came the sand-hill cranes, heading up from

Mexico, their long legs trailing behind them. Dad laughed when I said they looked like umbrellas sailing with the wind. He named the ducks that passed overhead—green-winged teal and widgeon and pintail and old squaw, quacking and whistling as they circled the wet spots. The white swans came with them, flying with measured beat, and the air rang with the crazy laughter of the loons.

Next came the golden plovers, returning from their winter feeding grounds in Patagonia. They flew north to Newfoundland, across the entire continent to Alaska, and up the Bering seacoast to nest every spring on the same little spot on the hill behind our cabin. Then the rare bristle-thighed curlews flew in all the way from Tahiti. And then came the arctic tern, the bird that shuns darkness and spends six months down around the South Pole and the other six months in the farthest north.

But the birds I remember most were the wild geese, and maybe that was because they never stopped, but kept right on flying to some mysterious and wonderful land beyond the mountains somewhere. When their haunting cries came drifting down to our cabin, it was as if they were asking me to spread my wings and join them. Sometimes their cobwebby patterns would extend across the entire sky as they swept northward. The valley would fill with their bugle calls, and I would stand on my tiptoes, waving my arms in the air. Mother thought I was silly, but Dad would put his arm around me and we would stand together, watch-

ing until they were only specks in the blue, and I knew he was thinking of that land beyond the mountains.

Tagging along behind the birds came Blueberry Pete, waddling up the muddy trail from Council, wearing hip boots and bent under a heavy packboard. He pulled off his floppy hat, with a net stretched around it to ward off the swarms of mosquitoes, pumped Dad's hand, then Mother's and mine. He was a little cleaner than the time I saw him in Nome, but he talked just as fast. He asked us about our trip and how did we like it here in Ophir Creek. He hoped we'd put in a better winter than he did back in the States. He never got any farther than Seattle, he said. The damn place had changed since he saw it last in '97, they had cable cars running up the hills, and what was worse they had some kind of a new damn contraption called an autymobile that didn't use any tracks but chased you all over the street. He'd stayed holed up all winter in a hotel, as near to the dock as he could get, just waiting for the first steamer to take him back to Alaska again. Nome had changed, too, he told Dad. The town was busier'n an Eskimo picking fleas, and everybody was hightailing it out to a new discovery they called the Third Beach Line. Dad's eyes lighted up as he listened, and Blueberry Pete added, "They figure it's the biggest damn strike they ever hit in Alaska. Why, there's nuggets the size of boulders . . ."

"Let's get in out of these mosquitoes," Mother interrupted quickly, "and I'll cook a pot of coffee."

Ophir Creek was over its banks, and snow water poured down every gully. Dad and Pete rigged a flume from a tumbling freshet, and set up their sluice boxes. Each wooden trough had slats nailed to the bottom, and the water ran over these riffles, carrying the loose pay dirt they shoveled into it. The force of the water swept away the dirt and small stones, but the heavier gold settled and lodged between the riffles. A pan coated with quicksilver caught the last fine dust as the muddy waste poured into Ophir Creek. At the end of the week they scraped out the sluice boxes and weighed their cleanings on a delicate gold-scale. Dad brought home a half-filled poke that night, and tossed it on the cabin table. "Not very good, Alma; not quite fifteen ounces," he said, shaking his head. "It sort of pinched out on us somehow."

"How much is that worth?" Mother asked him.

"Maybe a couple of hundred dollars or so," Dad sighed. "At this rate I'll have to start looking for something better."

"But this is fine, Warren; this is plenty," Mother insisted. "We can live very comfortably on a couple of hundred."

"Pete says they're making that much in a day at Nome Third Beach Line."

"I don't care what Pete says," Mother cut in sharply. "This is enough for us to have a home."

They finished washing their winter dump by the end of June, and I helped them move the sluice boxes to a summer open-cut. By that time the whole tundra was a magic carpet of white anemones and yellow but-

tercups and blue forget-me-nots. I would jump from one spongy niggerhead to another and land in a bed of brilliant-colored flowers, or miss and sink up to my knees in the cool wet sphagnum moss. Little Alaska longspurs would fly straight up into the air from under my feet and parachute slowly back down on set wings, trilling like a tinkling waterfall. Redpolls warbled in the willows, and all day long I heard the three descending notes of the olive-sided flycatcher—I nicknamed it the cheechako bird. The background music of the symphony was the ceaseless drone of mosquitoes. The swarms drifted across the tundra like smoke.

The blueberries were ripe later in the summer, and Mother and I climbed the hill above the open-cut, carrying our tin buckets. I filled my own little pail first, then started down to see Dad. To save time, I decided to walk the narrow board along the center of the wooden flume, filled with rushing water that was being carried down to a big iron pipe and fed to the hydraulic nozzle in the pit. Mother had warned me never to walk the plank, for if I fell off I would be swept into the pipe and never found again.

As usual, Mother was right. My foot slipped, and I was whirled downhill a hundred feet before I managed to grab a crosspiece and hang on, my legs floating out in front of me and my pail held straight up in the air. Mother never could explain what made her drop her own bucket and rush directly to the spot where I was silently waiting to be rescued. I got a thorough

spanking, which seemed unfair to me, because I hadn't spilled a single berry from my pail.

Dad was getting more and more discouraged as the weeks passed. The hydraulic nozzle was failing to blast out any rich pockets. Sometimes he would sit all through dinner without saying a word. He was smoking quite a few cigars, Mother noticed, and complaining about his crippled left hand. Late in August, Blueberry Pete shuffled into our cabin, shaved and wearing a clean shirt. He said he didn't want Dad to feel he was walking out on him or anything like that, so he was signing over his share to him. Dad had a family to think of, but with Pete it was different. He was just an old shovel stiff, dammit, and there wasn't enough here in the claim for both of them. "I'm pulling out in the morning on the last horse barge down the Niukluk," he said. "I'm heading for the Third Beach."

Dad smoked more and more cigars after Pete left, and his hand swelled so much that Mother had to put it in a sling. At last she couldn't stand the tension any longer. "Have you made up your mind to pull out, too?"

Dad nodded, relieved that it was out in the open now. "I'll get you a nice house in Council, and Klondy can go to school. You don't want to put up with another winter out here all alone."

"When are you leaving?" Mother forced herself to ask.

"Right after freeze-up," Dad said, "on the first snow."

It wasn't hard to find a house in Council. Empty cabins were showing up all over town, left by miners who had joined the Nome stampede. We moved into a three-room log building, near school, and Mother even had a back hallway closet to keep her slop bucket in. The split-log roof was lined inside with canvas, though Mother could never figure out why. Dad explained that the house was originally a tent. Later somebody built a new first floor of logs and lifted the whole tent to form an attic. The single stovepipe went up through the canvas, with just a little tin guard around it. At night it glowed red-hot. Mother would start smelling smoke and ask me to run up to the attic and see if the canvas was smoldering. Often it was.

Day after day, Mother watched the snow line creep down the slopes of the Fish River Mountains, but this time, instead of wishing for freeze-up the way she did in Nome, she awaited it with dread. Though she put on a cheerful front as she set our new home in order, I knew she was still hoping she might get Dad to change his mind. Once or twice she mentioned off-hand that Mr. Leslie seemed to be doing well with his store. Had Dad ever thought of buying a little business in Council? But Dad told her he planned bigger things than that for his wife and daughter. As soon as he made his pile in Nome he'd send for us and we'd all go back to the States together and live in a solid-gold mansion. Mother would nod, "Yes, Warren" and start getting me ready for school.

There was no schoolhouse in Council, because there were only seven pupils, so we held classes in the Pres-

byterian Church. Our teacher was a Mrs. Horning, who wore her hair in a pompadour, and a shirtwaist with a high collar. She looked like a Gibson girl. She stood where the pulpit was, and we sat in front of her in the slanting pews. I was the only one in the first grade, and my feet didn't even reach the floor. I hadn't been with other children before, so at first I was very shy and serious.

My seat was near the window, and I could dig my fingernails down through the heavy frost or suck my finger until it got warm and draw funny pictures on the pane. The other children watched me and began to titter. We all wore long underwear and wool stockings, bloomers and sweaters, and when the big pot-bellied stove warmed the church it was a heavenly sensation to scratch.

As the stove got red-hot, the bluebottle flies hibernating in the cracks of the ceiling came to life and began dropping all around me. I started catching them in my cupped hand. It got to be quite a game, and all the other children tried it, too. We brought little bottles to school to put our flies in, so we could compare scores at the end of the day.

Either I caught the most flies, or else I was caught most myself, because I was forever being called up to the pulpit for a scolding. Finally Mrs. Horning threatened me with a switching if she caught me again. But I was the champion, and I had to impress the other pupils, so I gathered another handful of flies. Just then Mrs. Horning spotted me. I didn't have time to hide them in my bottle, so I clapped them into my

mouth. This awed the other children, who couldn't tell whether I'd swallowed them or not, and Mrs. Horning didn't know, either. I stood in front of the pulpit with my cheeks puffed out. She asked me nervously if I felt all right, and when I opened my mouth to reply, all the flies flew out. Mrs. Horning got a willow switch and gave me a spanking in front of the whole class; I was a hero from then on.

At the approach of freeze-up, the whole town was getting ready for the annual Arctic Brotherhood Ball. It was to be a masquerade, and Dad suggested that Mother go as the Nugget Queen. He was going as the King of the Miners and he dressed the way he'd always pictured himself in his dreams, with paste diamonds on his fingers, a chain of huge brass weldings across his flowered vest and an egg-sized emerald of green glass in his silk cravat.

Mother worked for days on her own costume. She got out the box of gilded corks we'd hung on our Christmas tree in Ophir Creek, crumbled them into small pieces, and sewed them all over her white satin wedding gown. There were nuggets around the low neckline, and the cuffs of her sleeves, and the hem of her skirt, and down the long train, and she strung some more for bracelets, and made a chain of the largest pieces for her neck. She unraveled some manila rope, washed it and twisted it into two long braids that fell to her waist. She also wore a cardboard crown painted with gilt. I was the Nugget Princess and carried her train.

Dad was waiting by the door as she came out of the

bedroom, wearing a tiny satin mask. He looked at her in wonder and let out his breath in a long sigh. "Alma," he said slowly, "you're the most beautiful woman in the world."

They stepped into the street, and I heard Mother gasp. Big soft flakes filled the air.

"The first snow," she said.

Dad took her arm and pulled her close. "I'll be leaving for Nome in the morning," he admitted. "This is our last night for a while."

Every inch of the Arctic Brotherhood hall was decorated with evergreen wreaths, festoons of red-white-and-blue crepe paper, and American flags with forty-five stars. Spruce boughs banked the platform where the orchestra played, led by a violinist called the Professor—nobody knew his real name. Big Hans came over to me, smelling of hair tonic for a change, and asked for the first dance. I hardly came up to his belt buckle, but he was ponderously polite as we moved around the waxed floor.

Mother was the center of all attention, of course. The men crowded around her, and she swept gaily from one to another. She was stunning in her white-and-gold costume, and she couldn't help knowing it. I could see her eyes sparkling through the slits in her mask. She seemed to be courting new partners deliberately, and turning her back on my father whenever he tried to cut in. Once, over at the punch stand, I heard Dad whisper to her, "I thought I was supposed to have this intermission dance with you." She

tossed her head at Dad, and danced away with her partner across the floor as the orchestra struck up again.

At midnight there was a roll on the drums. The Professor tapped with his violin bow and announced the Grand March to choose the Queen of the Ball. Father looked around anxiously, but Mother was nowhere to be found. He asked me, "Klondy, where is she?" but I told him I hadn't seen her either. He raced frantically around the hall as the Grand March started, and I looked in the ladies' room, but Mother had vanished.

We were both frightened. I got my hat and coat, and we combed the whole town, the Miller House and the restaurants and saloons. Nobody had seen her. Dad was in a panic with jealousy. He started home at a dead run, and I had to sprint to keep up. His voice echoed in the empty house, and I began to cry. Just then he noticed the slop bucket was standing out in the back hallway. He opened the closet door. Mother was crouched inside, weeping. He was so glad to see her that he grabbed her in his arms, crushing her white satin dress as he kissed her.

"I'm not going to Nome," he kept saying. "Listen to me, Alma." She was still sobbing hysterically. "I'm not leaving. Don't you hear? Jorgensen's butcher shop is for sale. I'm buying it tomorrow. I'm staying here with you."

He kissed her again. Her mask fell off. Her eyes were dancing with triumph.

My father did his best to make a go of the butcher

shop he bought from Jorgensen. All he had to sell was smoked ham and bacon and frozen reindeer meat he got from the Lapp herders, but his store was very popular because he always tipped the scales in favor of the customer, and tossed in extra cuts. He could never resist trying to impress people.

After school, I helped out by making deliveries around town. I wasn't very dependable, because I'd stop to play with the other children in snow tunnels we had dug underneath the main street. The hard-packed drifts were honeycombed with our secret passages. It was warm inside, and so quiet we couldn't hear the horse teams and dog sleds passing overhead. Sometimes on my way back I would lie on my stomach and go belly-busting over the bluff to the Niukluk River, so the other children would be impressed. In some ways I took after Dad.

The only fly in the ointment was my weekly violin lesson. I'd decided I wanted a violin, and a neighbor, who was leaving with her husband for the Third Beach Line, said she'd sell me hers for seven dollars. My father said he wouldn't pay seven cents to hear somebody sawing on a fiddle, but I spoke to Mother and did a little talking to God at night. Mother, God and I won out. Mother arranged for me to take lessons with the Professor, and the idea of giving up some of my spare time came as a jolt, because I'd figured I could start playing instantly. I began to wonder why I had been so foolish as to pray for a violin, and why God hadn't told me about practicing. For a long time after that I didn't pray for anything.

I was the Professor's only pupil. Everyone was surprised when he agreed to take me on, but one evening he mentioned a little daughter my own age who died before he came to Alaska. I never knew where he came from. He had a funny accent, German or maybe Hungarian, and I used to imagine him as a famous violinist who played before the crowned heads of Europe until his tragedy occurred and he joined the gold rush to forget.

He had a thin, deep-lined face, a high forehead and long sparse gray hair. He always wore brown corduroy pants and carpet slippers. He was very autocratic and hard to satisfy, and whenever I fumbled he would rap me across the knuckles with his violin bow, saying, "No, dot iss no goot! You are nod trying. You haf talent if you vill apply yourself only." Years later, when I was directing my own orchestra, I wondered how the Professor had ever seen any talent in a little pupil whose only thought was to finish her lesson, get outdoors and slide on the snow.

The Professor's log cabin was the central office at Council for the new telephone line which had just been completed from Nome all the way to Candle on the Arctic Ocean, 205 miles of wire strung on tripods across the tundra. The switchboard was in the front room of the cabin beside the Professor's desk. While I was practicing, he would lean back in his swivel chair and push in or pull out a plug.

The kitchen in the back room was partly curtained, but I could see a fat Eskimo squaw sitting on the floor, scowling at me. Her name was Short and Dirty, and

she resented all female visitors. Once when a group of lady church members came to call, the Professor asked her in his best Continental manner, "Shorty, dear, will you serve the tea, please." The fat squaw parted the curtains, placed her hands on her massive hips, and glowered. "Somebody come, you say 'Shorty, dear,'" she mimicked, "but nobody here, you say, 'Short and Dirt, you sollabitch, bring my goddamn tea.'" If he showed too much attention to any of the ladies, she had a standard threat: "Okay. I go. White woman plenty good enough for you."

While I played, I could feel her dark almond eyes fixed on me through the curtain. My full-sized violin was too big for a child, of course. My arm would sag with the weight, and the Professor would rise from his swivel chair in exasperation. He would tie a long string to the neck of my violin, fasten the other end to a hook in the ceiling, and warn me not to let my arm drop again. Now and then he had to interrupt my lesson to answer the switchboard, and I would stand waiting until my arm was numb. Sometimes the string would snap, and the Professor would crack my knuckles with his violin bow. When I was on the verge of tears, he would take his own violin out of a worn alligator case and begin to play.

The music was soft at first, as though it came from far away. Then it would swell, filling the whole cabin with fire and fury. I would be swept up with it and borne into another world. Even Short and Dirty would come out from behind the curtain and squat at his feet, looking up into the Professor's face like a fat brown

spaniel. Then he would put his violin away. I would go on with my practicing, but it seemed more useless than ever after hearing him, and I was relieved when I broke my arm sliding on the snow and my lessons came to an abrupt end. I didn't touch my violin again until we moved to Nome.

I was just starting my third year in school, in September of 1905, when Mother found out from Dr. Anton that she was going to have another baby. Dad started handing out cigars to all the customers in the butcher shop and bragging about the new son that was on the way. Mother asked him how he was so sure it would be a boy.

"He's got to be," Dad insisted. "He's going to be a chip off the old block. He'll be born with a nose for gold."

Dad was only partly correct, as it turned out. I had a brother, all right, but he never became a prospector.

Now that the new baby was coming, Dad worked harder than ever at his butcher shop, but everything seemed to be going against him. He brought in some live sheep, to attract more customers, and put them in a corral behind the store. Malemute dogs broke in, scattered them into the hills, and the wolves devoured every one. Early in the summer he had ordered a shipment of frozen turkeys from the States, to supply customers at Thanksgiving. The steamer from Seattle was delayed two weeks by storms, and the turkeys had to be held over in Nome until freeze-up. By the time they arrived in Council they had thawed and frozen again several times. He sold every one, and the result

was very nearly a major disaster. On Thanksgiving night a ptomaine epidemic swept the whole town, and Dr. Anton worked for days nursing Dad's stricken customers back to health. From then on, our butcher shop was virtually boycotted.

Dad was nearly broke when the Professor sent word for him to come at once; there was a phone call from Nome. It was Blueberry Pete. He'd heard about the trouble with the damn turkeys, guessed Dad might be a little shy of cash, and just wanted to let him know he'd sent him a money order; it ought to be along in a day or two. There wasn't any hurry to pay him back, dammit; he'd hit it rich on the Third Beach; he was practically wallowing in the damn stuff, and if Dad needed any more be sure to let him know, because he was picking up nuggets the size of boulders; this was the biggest damn strike he'd ever been on.

Dad walked slowly back to the house and lighted a long black cigar, and then lighted another one from the stub. Mother sat on the sofa and watched him; the baby was only a couple of months away, and she was taking it easy now. He smoked one cigar after another for the next few days, and his left hand was badly swollen when the mail stage came, bringing Pete's money order. Dad opened a fresh box of cigars. His hand was aching, and he held his arm in the air to relieve the throbbing. At last Mother asked quietly, "When are you leaving for Nome, Warren?"

He looked at her in wonder, as he did the night she wore the Nugget Queen gown. Then he bent over and kissed her. "The stage is starting back tomorrow,"

he said. His eyes had that faraway light. "I'll make my pile in no time at all," he promised. "Then you and Klondy and the baby will never want for a single thing. We'll live in a solid-gold mansion."

Mother didn't protest. Something was calling him, she knew; something he couldn't resist. She understood, and smiled.

Dad started toward his room to pack, then turned in the doorway. "I know what to call the baby," he said. "We'll name him Ophir for good luck."

Four

Ophir was born the end of February. On the first day of March a dog team arrived in Council with a message from Dad. This time he'd really struck it rich. Nome's Third Beach Line was a bonanza. He'd reached bedrock at the base of Anvil Mountain, and the pay dirt was running three dollars to the pan. "Come to Nome on the first downriver barge after spring breakup," he wrote. "Ophir's brought me good luck."

Mother read the letter a second time, her black eyes glistening, and she smiled at the baby in her arms. "You've brought us all good luck," she crooned to him.

We left Council the end of June, riding a barge

down the Niukluk River. It twisted and curled back on itself like a snake, and in places was so narrow I could almost touch the bank on either side. Overhanging willows brushed the boatmen who manned the sweeps. Roosting ptarmigan burst from the branches overhead as we moved with the current. The scow was open, with a plank deck in the bow just big enough to hold the tow horse. He had hauled the barge upriver all the way from Golovin Bay to Council, but on the downstream drift he was just a passenger like Mother and me, munching hay and oats and enjoying the ride.

The barge captain spread some mail sacks on the ribbed bottom for Mother to sit on. She nursed my four-months-old brother while I clambered from one end of the scow to the other, getting in the way of the sweeps, or leaning far over the gunwale to peer down through the clear water at the salmon and grayling and Dolly Varden trout which darted across the gravel bars. During our noon tie-up at White Mountain, Mother had her first chance to wash out Ophir's nursing bottles and refill them with syrupy-sweet Eagle Brand milk mixed with hot water.

A rain squall came up as we neared the mouth of the Niukluk, and the men rigged up a prospector's tent for us to crawl under. They took advantage of the wind to hang a big tarpaulin for a sail, after which we fairly sped across the white-capped open water toward Golovin. This was the oldest seaport in northwestern Alaska, a fur-trading post and herring saltery long be-

fore gold was discovered. A fine-looking Eskimo woman hurried down to meet us, past chained dogs and the carcasses of white whales staked to the water's edge.

"Me Molly Dexter," she shouted. "Me Reindeer Queen!" She took Ophir from Mother's arms, and led us to her neat log store, with its racks of furs—white fox and arctic lynx and gray timber wolf and ermine and mink. Her husband was a white man, Joe Dexter. She had saved him from freezing once, she informed Mother, and had decided to marry him. "You stop my house tonight," she ordered. "Tomorrow you go Nome on schooner."

The attic where we slept was littered with tanned sealskins and bits of fur. Molly's tiny old mother was sitting flat-legged on the floor, her face wrinkled like a dried apple, silently sewing mukluks and parkas and arm-length wolf's head mitts. I watched her, fascinated, till I fell asleep, and woke to hear the *Duxbury's* whistle tooting impatiently in the fog. Joe Dexter rowed us out to the schooner in his dory, loaded with furs sacked for shipment to Seattle.

A couple of native boys with pike poles fended off the ice cakes as the *Duxbury* crunched slowly ahead, its engine barely turning. The distillate fumes below decks were so sickening that Mother stood on the steps, holding baby Ophir and staring anxiously at the solid gray weather. Now and then Captain Swenson would yank the whistle cord and listen for the answering echo to tell him the distance from shore. Once when he pulled the cord the mist resounded with shrill cries, like hysterical laughter.

"Sea birds, little girl," Captain Swenson explained to me, "millions of kittiwakes and sea parrots nesting on the cliffs at Bluff."

Then I knew where we were. Bluff was the place where Mr. Brower's horses had gone through the ice four years ago, and Mother shivered in recollection as the bergs scraped the sides of the schooner. "Ice always hangs tough in here this time of year," Captain Swenson assured her, "but we'll be all right as soon as we get around Topkok and hit the open Bering Sea."

The twenty-four-hour day was almost over when we pushed out of the fog. I saw, directly ahead in the north, the red ball of the midnight sun dip into the sea and rise again at once to start another day. Its crimson glow tinted the pall of soft-coal smoke hanging over Nome, and the windows of every building along the waterfront sparkled like rubies in the reflected light. Now, after Ophir Creek and Council, it seemed like a magic city.

Best of all, Dad was on the beach to meet us. He was dressed as the King of the Miners, but this was no masquerade. The gold chain across his vest was real. Genuine diamonds flashed on his fingers. He swung his baby son proudly onto a shoulder and carried him along Front Street, calling greetings right and left, tipping his wide-brimmed Stetson to the ladies in courtly fashion. He was a big operator now; everyone smiled and hailed him by name, and occasionally as he walked he would steal a sly glance at Mother to make sure she realized the importance of being Mrs. Warren Nelson.

He halted before a whitewashed log house. "Not another one like it in town," he told Mother. The only trees around Nome for fifty miles were waist-high willows, and they'd had to tow the logs all the way from Golovin Bay. Instead of squatting amid the tundra muck and weeds, like the ramshackle frame cabins on either side, it had a fine yard of smoothly raked gravel, with a flower box across the front. A plate-glass picture window faced the Bering Sea, and up where the whitewashed logs formed a peak was a diamond of fancy stained glass. Reindeer antlers were nailed to the ridgepole. Mother caught her breath.

"It's so beautiful, Warren," she whispered; "almost like a little church."

Dad couldn't wait to show off the furnishings. The front room was lined with green burlap, stretched across the moss-chinked logs, and there was an imposing library of leather-bound volumes, including a complete set of law books which Dad liked to show off but which I never saw him open. Flames glowed cheerfully through the isinglass window of the hard-coal heater in the center of the room. Dad spread a white polar bear hide next to it, for baby Ophir to crawl on, and gave him his emptied six-shooter to play with.

In an unheated back room, he showed us an enormous white porcelain tub with eagle-claw feet. "Only private bathtub in town," he boasted. Unfortunately there was no place for the water to run out except onto the floor. As time went on, the tub became a handy catchall for wet boots, snowshoes and dog harnesses.

Finally he led Mother to the kitchen, and she stared in wonder at the brand-new, soft-coal range. Then her eyes lit on the familiar five-gallon slop can, naked and ugly behind it. Dad said quickly, "Maybe the house isn't solid gold but . . ."

"Who wants to live in a gold house?" Mother laughed at him. "We're all together again."

Mother always said that those early days in Nome were the happiest of her life. For eight months of the year, when the ice-locked community was cut off from the rest of the world, there was an almost continual round of banquets and entertainments and fancy-dress balls. A lot of Nome women sent all the way to Paris for the latest gowns. Beneath sweeping trains they wore long woolen underwear to protect themselves from the bitter cold. Some of the dresses had plunging necklines, and you'd see a touch of red wool showing at the bottom of the V.

Dad used to protest at putting on white tie and tails, although he was an excellent dancer and secretly enjoyed cutting a fine figure. He preferred to drop in at Eagle Hall for a stag night of wrestling and prize fighting. The fights were usually put on by Dad's fellow lodge member, Tex Rickard, proprietor of the Northern Saloon. They attracted such Stateside headliners as Frank Gotch and Jack (Twin) Sullivan. Later that year Tex Rickard lost his saloon to gambler Frank Hall in a dice game. He left for Goldfield, Nevada, where he promoted the world's championship match on September 3, 1906, between Battling Nelson

and Joe Gans. "If it hadn't been for a bad roll of the dice," Dad used to say, "we'd have had that fight right here in Nome."

Nome, in 1906, had settled into a respectable mining community of about 10,000, less than half its population at the turn of the century. The brief brawling frontier days were over, the beach sands had been washed of their easy gold, the gunmen and tin horns had headed for new stampedes. Schools and churches had taken the place of saloons and gambling halls. There were three newspapers in town, and many fraternal lodges—the Pioneers of Alaska, Arctic Brotherhood, Sons of the North, the Mums and the Eagles, whose big hall became Nome's community center. Show troupes made round trips from Seattle to put on *East Lynne* and *The Bohemian Girl*. We even had classic recitals and opera. Social life had become nouveau riche: card parties with bid whist and five hundred instead of the blackjack and faro of the gambling dens, imported divas instead of the brassy dance-hall floosies.

The fire of 1905 had wiped out the old red-light district of Nome. Now the sporting girls were confined to a small fenced area at the end of an alley, a section referred to with uplifted eyebrows as Behind the Board Wall. The occupants were seldom seen in the streets. Many months passed before I spotted my friend Toodles. When no one was watching, she stooped to give me a quick hug, and then ducked back behind the board wall. I noticed she was wearing a mink coat, which Mother had told me was a "badge

of the trade." Now I was old enough to understand what Mother meant, but I still liked Toodles.

Dad's claim at Anvil Mountain was on the Third Beach Line, last and biggest of all the Nome strikes. It lay four miles inland, the ancient shoreline of the Bering Sea, buried under eighty feet of frozen silt. Dad and Blueberry Pete were partners in the Solo Mine. Pete said he was just a damn old shovel stiff, and he was pleased to have Dad manage the mine. Teeth clenched on a big cigar tilted skyward, the thumb of his crippled left hand hooked in his vest, Dad would go from one group of workers to another, supervising the operations, paying off the shovel stiff, carrying the clean-ups to the bank. Now and then he would take a turn firing the donkey engine, which made steam for thawing through the frozen muck, or ride the bucket down to bedrock to pan samples of paydirt.

He was a good miner. Everybody called him the lucky Swede—but it wasn't luck, he insisted; he just worked harder. "The Swedes make it, and the lawyers take it away," he used to say; though Dad needed no help from Nome's hundred-odd lawyers to spread his gold around. He was always handing out cigars, always digging into his poke to grubstake some prospector, and he was a familiar sight in the Northern Saloon, playing solo and setting up the drinks for everybody else. For a time he gloried in the novel sensation of being a big money man, a leading citizen of the town.

Everybody in Nome was prospering in those days. The Third Beach Line seemed inexhaustible. Gold was flowing freely, and a platter of ham-and-eggs cost four

dollars. Even the stew bums in Nome were getting their share. The swamper in the Northern Saloon offered to polish the brass spittoons for nothing, in exchange for the privilege of panning the sawdust in front of the bar, where patrons paying for drinks spilled gold dust on the floor. In the Arctic Restaurant on Front Street the cook kept a pot of soup bubbling on the stove all winter, using the greasy wooden spoon to measure out a customer's dust. He rinsed the spoon in the soup. By winter's end he had amassed a comfortable stake at the bottom of the pot, and went back to the States in the spring.

I caught the gold fever myself. Blueberry Pete made me a rocker and showed me the best gravel on the dump. I earned all my spending money that summer by shoveling dirt into the hopper, sloshing it with water, then rocking away the lighter silt and pebbles while gold caught in the riffles across the bottom. I saved enough matched nuggets to make a necklace, with a locket filled with the coarse gold; I have that necklace to this day. Even Brother Ophir did some panning. He was just going on five, but Blueberry Pete and the other miners decided it was high time Warren Nelson's boy learned to be a prospector. They filled a tin with dirt and water, squatted around him and showed him how to swish it. As the water carried away the silt, Ophir stared in delight at a layer of five-dollar gold pieces in the bottom of the pan.

Mother had insisted that I start my violin lessons again, but as soon as practice was over I would run out and play. Nome was a perfect place for a little girl to

grow up; Mother knew I was safe anywhere, the miners were always watching over me, and it was daylight around the clock. I rode Dad's horse Napoleon by the hour around the flower-dotted countryside. On the spongy tundra, Napoleon would feel his way as though he were treading on eggs, but when he struck the hard-packed sand of the beach he would gallop excitedly along the surf, kicking up water as he raced toward the sandspit.

There the Eskimos always made their summer camp, netting tomcod and humpback and dog salmon, which they peddled around town or hung on racks to dry in the sun for their winter food. Every day the hunters came in from the Bering Sea, paddling skin-covered kayaks heaped high with hair seals and eider ducks. Sometimes when the wind blew from the Siberian shore, we could hear the bellowing herds of walrus riding the drifting ice. Picked crews would launch their big umiaks through the surf and disappear into the fog. Hours later they would sail back chanting a triumphant "Ai-yi-yi," their boats loaded to the water line with gore-spattered blubbery hulks weighing more than a ton each, and toss armloads of yard-long ivory tusks to the squaws wading out into the surf.

Napoleon and I were always welcomed as friends. The Eskimos would shout a merry "Allooo!" when we showed up for a visit, and I would loop Napoleon's reins over a fish rack where he could nibble at the dried salmon. I loved to wander from one sod igloo to another, watching the old men of the village carving ivory in the shelter of an upended umiak, or talking

with the women as they spun reindeer sinew into thread and sewed skin garments. They were always happy, always bubbling with laughter, always telling me they wished they could have babies with golden hair and blue eyes like mine. Once a whole group of native women and children came to our house to return my call, squatting on the floor in Mother's front room and reeking of rancid seal oil. Mother seemed a little surprised, but she handed out sugar cubes and made them welcome. She always had a way of making people feel at home.

I was growing up fast, all arms and legs, just a gangling thirteen-year-old with weather-tanned cheeks and long blond curls tumbling in the wind. I was too busy riding my horse and playing at Dad's mine to bother about dressing up pretty, like older girls in town. I used to gaze at their pictures in the store windows; all the best-looking ones were entered in the Floral Queen Contest, sponsored by the Nome merchants, to name the Alaska flower. The tickets were on sale at the stores for a dollar apiece, and each ticket was a vote. I never dreamed of entering the contest myself—I could never compete with those glamorous beauties I saw in the photographs around town—so I couldn't believe my eyes when I opened the *Nome Nugget* one night and saw my own name on the list. Next morning I ran into Big Hans on the street. "Some of us fellers come in from Council," he confessed, "and we figured by God that Warren Nelson's girl ought to be queen."

I wasn't so happy about running for royal office, but

Mother was delighted. She made me put on my best clothes, tie a ribbon around my hair, and even wash my face. The older girls weren't too happy at the thought of a little towheaded school kid having the nerve to compete with them. Their own sponsors bought more tickets, but each day my name crept higher and higher on the list. Most of the other girls dropped out, throwing their votes to the two main contenders, but Big Hans was never one to give up a fight. On the last night of the contest he corralled all the miners from the outlying creeks. They bought up every remaining ticket, and on June 21, 1910, the *Nome Nugget* carried the headline: KLONDY NELSON ELECTED FLORAL QUEEN.

A holiday was declared. All the school children swarmed onto flatcars and rode the narrow-gauge railroad to the hills behind town, to gather forget-me-nots for my throne. I missed all the fun, because I had to stay home for a final fitting of my gown, made of sleazy satin and bound in gold braid. My gilt crown was covered with forget-me-nots, which drooped and wilted by coronation time that night. A flower girl carried my long train as I walked down the aisle of the crowded Eagle Hall to the stage. An honor guard of high school boys made an arch of crossed swords, which they had borrowed from the army officers at Fort Davis, and I marched beneath it to my throne. Governor Clark came all the way from Juneau to preside at the ceremonies. He placed the crown on my head, and I stood up on shaky legs to read my proclamation:

"We, Klondy the First, Queen of the Seward Peninsula and adjacent islands, in commemoration of this, the first hour of our reign, do herewith and hereby proclaim, choose, and designate the lowly FORGET-ME-NOT as the chief jewel in my flowery crown. It is hereby ordered and commanded that this, my favorite flower, henceforth be treated, honored, and used as an emblem of our country by all our faithful subjects."

The forget-me-not is the official flower of Alaska to this day.

The biggest holiday of the summer, of course, was the Fourth of July. The sleek white Coast Guard cutter *Bear*, back from its hazardous ice patrol along the rim of the Arctic, dropped anchor offshore. Its lifeboats headed toward the beach, full of young sailors eager for their first shore leave in months. Wearing freshly pressed blue uniforms and white hats, they strolled along the main street, or wandered quietly down a back alley to vanish behind the Board Wall. A carnival spirit gripped the town. American flags fluttered from every window, the children wore star-spangled outfits, and on the beach 100 King Island Eskimos, who had paddled across the open Bering Sea in their big umiaks, gave their annual exhibition of kayak rolling and blanket tossing. A dozen men would grasp the edges of a walrus hide and snap it taut, popping a young Eskimo girl high in the air, and catching her again as she landed, as deftly as a long-spur lighting on the tundra.

Offshore a rust-covered hulk had anchored at the mouth of Snake River. It was a Russian trading boat

from East Cape in Siberia, only a hundred miles away, which had come here to peddle tins of vodka to the Eskimos. The law forbade white men to furnish liquor to natives, but the Russians had no compunctions. They only laughed as the Eskimos, poisoned by foreign firewater, were carried off, kicking and screaming.

Instinctively the townspeople drew away from the heavy-bearded visitors in their long black coats and black fur caps. The Russians were drinking heavily. I saw one of them clear a dog out of his path by kicking its ribs with his heavy leather boot, and Dad muttered to Mother, "There's going to be trouble." Pocketing the money they had taken from the Eskimos, they stumbled up the sloping beach and disappeared down the back alley, heading for the Board Wall.

Soon I heard shouting and feet running on the wooden sidewalk past our house. Dad grabbed his six-shooter and joined the deputy marshals and city police, racing toward the alley. I ducked out of the house and followed at a safe distance. I could hear the splintering of furniture inside the Board Wall, the shattering of glass, feminine screams and loud foreign oaths. Occasionally there was a louder thump against the wooden fence as a Russian crashed through it into the muddy street, landing on his back with his boots kicking in the air. A young Coast Guard sailor would dust his hands with satisfaction, then dash back into the melee to help his shipmates and the local law officers.

It was all over in a few minutes. The remaining

Russians came tumbling out of the wrecked area, picked themselves up, and stampeded toward the beach, their tattered black coats flapping behind them. The grinning Coast Guard boys chased them all the way downhill to their dories at the mouth of the river. Dad said later it was the best Fourth of July they'd ever had in Nome.

The police formed a hollow square, and herded the girls along Front Street toward the jail. Some of them staggered tipsily, but they held their frowzy heads high as they marched, and pulled their mink coats about them defiantly. I ran up an outside stairway to see better, and caught my breath as I recognized Toodles. Her pink cheeks were smeared, and one eye was blackened and almost shut. Her glance met mine, but she looked away quickly.

The next morning I pushed my way into the Commissioner's Court with the other spectators. The girls were lined up in the prisoner's dock, woebegone and a little frightened now. Toodles was standing at the end of the line. I worked my way through the crowd toward her, and whispered, "I'm sorry." She reached out and patted my hand. Just then the judge looked down and saw us. I stepped back hurriedly; the judge was a friend of the family's, and I was afraid he'd be angry. He looked at Toodles, and then at me, and the whole expression on his face changed. I'd just been elected Floral Queen and perhaps that gave me a royal prerogative. Anyway, his voice sounded less stern than before. "Sentence suspended," he said to

the defendants, and rapped his gavel. Toodles gave me a smile that I'll never forget.

That summer one of Dad's crews tunneled into a prehistoric stream bed that led to still another rich pocket of gold. The yield was big enough to make the front page of the *Nugget*. Dad reveled in his reputation as a big-time operator, but the old excitement was gone. He had money, success, security—and yet it wasn't enough. Dad was a prospector, and prospectors don't look for security. They're forever looking for something shining over the next hill.

I guess Blueberry Pete felt the same thing. That August he suddenly broke the news to Dad that he was pulling out. The Solo Mine was doing fine, dammit, but lately there'd been a rumor about a new discovery over on the arctic slope, some damn place called Candle, and he guessed he'd just mush up there and have a look. Mother's face went white when Dad told her that Pete was leaving.

"Why, that's the most ridiculous thing I ever heard of," she protested. "He can make all the money he ever needs right here."

"I think I know how he feels," Dad said. He took out a long cigar and bit off the end. "It's something in a man's blood."

"I can understand quitting a claim if it doesn't pan out," Mother insisted, "but to go off and leave a steady producer like the Solo, which you can work year after year . . ."

"That isn't prospecting, Alma. That's business.

Pretty soon this whole country will be covered with dredges; there'll be nothing but machinery and big syndicates. Mining will be as dull as—as running a butcher shop,” he said, and then caught himself and hastily lit his cigar.

“Warren, you know those cigars only make your hand ache. Why are you smoking so many lately?” she asked. But I think she knew why. She saw me standing in the doorway. “Klondy”—impatiently—“you’re late for your violin lesson.”

I had been practicing hard all that summer. In November, after the last boat, I gave my first public recital as a soloist with the Bruner Club. This was an organization of professional musicians. It was a great honor for a thirteen-year-old girl to appear with them. Fred Hanks, the cornetist, said that I had unusual talent, and Mother set her heart on sending me Outside to study. She kept working on Dad, and finally he agreed that I could go to the States next summer. Mother made plans for me to stay with her sister in Denver, and take lessons from David Abromowitz, a noted teacher there.

Usually I loved the winter and spring in Nome, but this year they seemed to drag endlessly. I couldn’t wait for summer to come. Mother had booked my passage on the *Victoria* for an August sailing, and I started packing for the trip as early as June. Mother was making a whole new wardrobe for me and I had to stand for a million fittings. I was so busy with fittings that I hardly noticed how strange and moody Dad was acting these days. He didn’t go out to the

mine much any more. He spent a lot of time sitting by the window staring out across the Bering Sea, holding his throbbing left hand and complaining. And then, in July, Blueberry Pete returned.

He came back to Nome on the first schooner out of the Arctic. They had to help him out of the dory. His cheeks sagged, his eyes were hollow, and whenever he spoke his voice ended in a racking cough. It had happened in March, he told Dad; he got lost in a damn blizzard, and they found him the next morning walking in circles on the ice in Kiwalik Bay, with both his lungs frosted. Now he'd have to head for a hot, dry climate like Arizony. Just his damn luck, Blueberry Pete moaned; he was on the track of the biggest find of his life; nuggets the size of boulders, up at the head of the bay, where the Immachuk River ran between a couple of mountains shaped like donkeys' ears. This was the very place; right here on the map. Now he'd have to spend the rest of his life thinking about it, if he lived that long . . .

Dad took to his bed the day Blueberry Pete sailed for the States. He studied the mark on the map, and his crippled hand started aching so badly that Mother had to tie a string to the ceiling and hoist it in the air to keep it from swelling. He lay there for a week, groaning every time Mother came near. At last he yanked the string down, sat on the edge of the bed and reached for his clothes. "Warren, where are you going?" Mother gasped. "You've got to stay quiet."

"I can't stay any longer," Dad said. "I'm going to Candle."

Mother didn't answer. She took the broken string, wrapped it around her fingers into a neat ball, and put it in the bureau drawer.

"I'll arrange everything, Alma," Dad promised, pulling on his clothes hurriedly. "You'll have charge accounts all over town; there's plenty of money in the bank; you won't have to worry about a thing." The old familiar ring was in his voice. "I'll make my pile in no time, and we'll all go back to the States together. We'll live in a mansion studded with diamonds . . ."

"Warren," Mother said quietly, "there's something I haven't told you. I'm going to have another baby."

"That's wonderful." Dad beamed as he lit a cigar. "We'll name him Solo for good luck."

After selling the Solo Mine he left for the Arctic in style. He chartered the schooner that had brought Blueberry Pete down, hiring a whole crew of men, loading the decks with expensive mining machinery, donkey engines and the latest hydraulic pumps, and buying a year's outfit of clothes and provisions for everybody. He waved to Mother and Ophir and me as we stood on the jetty, seeing him off. "Wait for me, Alma!" he shouted. "I'll be back before the baby is born!"

But he didn't come back as he promised. Mother never saw him again. I saw him only once more in my life.

At first I hardly realized he was gone, I was so thrilled about my own trip. The *Victoria* was due to sail on Saturday afternoon, but when Mother and I went to the bank to pick up the cash for my ticket,

the teller was very upset. "Warren drew a check for the whole balance to pay for his grubstake, Mrs. Nelson," he said. "I'm sorry. The account's been closed."

That Saturday, my nose pressed to the picture-window in our front room, I watched the *Victoria* disappear over the horizon without me.

Five

First Mother sold the porcelain bathtub with the eagle-claw feet. The neighbor who bought it had no plumbing either; she put it in her front yard and filled it with dirt to grow leaf lettuce. Mother also sold our piano to the Eskimo mission, and then one morning I saw that old Napoleon's hitching post was empty. I never found out what happened to him; I always hoped he was lucky enough to wind up as a tow horse on the Niukluk. Our leather-bound library went next, all except the set of law books that Dad had been so proud of; somehow Mother couldn't bring herself to part with them. I offered to sell my violin—we couldn't afford lessons any more—and that was when Big Hans brought the news.

"Hang onto that fiddle, Klondy," he said with a grin. "You're going to need it." His giant figure loomed in the doorway, teetering a little. "Folks here are fixing up a benefit concert to raise money for your steamer ticket. I been elected to tell ya."

Nome people were like that in the old days. They all knew that Dad had left home and taken the money for my trip Outside, and they did something about it. They were the kindest and most generous folks I've ever known, those early pioneers of Alaska. They had conquered the north country together, they shared each other's hardships, and when trouble came they moved in quietly to help one another. They were plain-spoken people, sometimes blunt and even profane; but there was more pure gold in their hearts than they ever dug out of the ground.

Everybody pitched in to give a hand. The *Nome Nugget* ran front-page stories about the benefit. There were posters in all the store windows, and Dad's own lodge, the Eagles, donated decorations for the platform. My schoolmates sold tickets from door to door. Big Hans made the rounds of all the saloons on the big night, and herded the shovel stiffs into the Presbyterian Church. The Bruner Club arranged the musical program. Fred Hanks rendered a triple-tongue cornet solo, and then I stepped onto the stage, a gawky fourteen-year-old, carrying my seven-dollar violin. First I played a selection from the opera *Martina*, and I thought they would never stop clapping. For an encore I did the miners' favorite, "The Bluebells of Scotland," with variations. I was faltering and uncertain at first, but then my violin seemed to take over and play for me. The music swelled and filled the whole church, sweeping me with it, out of Eagle Hall and back over the years. I saw the old Professor and his squaw squatting before him like a

brown spaniel; Mr. Brower with a face like a horse's skull; my first Christmas at Ophir Creek and the miners singing and the tin star at the top of the tree. My eyes were so blurred I couldn't see the faces in front of me, but my violin was telling everyone the gratitude and love I felt. When I finished, there was a dead silence. Everybody stood up, and Mother rushed to me and threw her arms around me. "Klondy," she whispered, "I wish your dad could have heard you tonight."

They all came around to congratulate me after the concert. Suddenly the ladies drew aside, and a mink-coated figure pushed her way through the crowd. She slipped a fat roll of bills into my hand. "From the girls," Toodles said in a low voice. "They all chipped in for your trip."

Mother was standing right beside me. Toodles averted her eyes and started to leave, but Mother held her arm.

"Thank you; you're a good woman," she said, and kissed her. For once, the pink of Toodles' cheeks was a true blush as she hurried away.

I booked passage on the same *S. S. Senator* that had brought Mother and me to Alaska nine years earlier. I hesitated to leave Mother, with the baby coming, but she said she would be all right. "I'll take in a couple of lodgers," she said. "They can use your old room. Klondy, you must go on; you must make the violin your career. It's the one thing I've got left to make me happy."

The following spring I received two letters from

Nome. One was from Mother, written in her spidery Old Country script. Everything was fine, she said; the baby was due any day now. Big Hans was looking out for Ophir. She was thrilled to hear about the public concerts I'd given that winter in Denver, and she wanted me to keep on studying hard.

The other letter was from Big Hans, dated three weeks later. Evidently the dog team with Mother's letter had been delayed by storms, and the two notes had caught the same steamer from Seward. Hans' penciled scrawl was brief: "Baby was borne dead," he wrote bluntly. "Your mother working as cook at Big Hurrah Mine. Not fealing so good. You better com back home."

I could see the change in Nome as soon as I landed. The town had already started to slump, by this spring of 1912. The steamer *Victoria* had only a few other passengers besides myself, and there were no crowds on the beach to greet us. The streets were half empty, some of the store windows were boarded up, and fireweed sprouted around the sagging front steps of untenanted buildings.

People lounged in aimless groups on the sidewalks as I hurried down Front Street to our house. Their faces looked older and somehow emptier, like the deserted buildings; they had nothing to do. The big syndicates were coming in, just as Dad had predicted, and they didn't need gangs of shovel stiffs; just a few trained mechanics to operate the dredges. Some of the Third Beach claims had filled with water, and were being abandoned to the more efficient hydraulic noz-

zles, which could blast away the frozen silt and lay bare acres of bedrock. More and more absentee corporations were taking over—Dad's old Solo Mine had been absorbed by a group of bankers in Boston—and they ran their own commissaries, contributing little or nothing to the town's support. Stores and restaurants depended on random trade. Most of the big money was going Outside.

The whitewashed logs of our house had begun to flake. The stained glass window was still there, but the reindeer antlers had fallen down during the winter and nobody had bothered to nail them up. I found our front room full of lodgers, scratching their matches on the leather bindings of Dad's law books and resting their muddy boots on our white polar-bear hide that Dad had spread beside the stove for Ophir to crawl on. The floors were twisted skew-gee with frost heaves, slanting up one side of the room and down the other. Most of all, I was shocked at the change that had come over Mother. She had the same baby-fine complexion, but the dots of pink in her cheeks were brighter, feverish. Her lovely long hands were wrinkled and coarsened with work.

From now on, I had little time to play my violin. I had to help Mother at home after school, and earn a few dollars by hauling water during the winter. Every morning I would get up in pitch darkness, hitch my three Malemutes to a sled, and drive a half-mile down the silent streets of Nome to the Snake River. There I would chop a hole in the ice, and fill a half dozen five-gallon cans, shoveling snow on top to keep

the water from sloshing out. Then I would haul them back to town and dump them into barrels in my customers' kitchens.

Most of the Nome children had to rustle for a living. I remember a redheaded boy, the son of Mr. Doolittle who ran the laundry. He got up the same time I did to deliver papers around town. When we passed each other in the bitter-cold dawn, he would wave to me and grin. Jimmy was always cocky, always getting into scraps with bigger boys and licking them, always finishing his paper route before the rest. Everybody admired him, and Mother predicted he'd amount to something someday. Time proved her right; Jimmy Doolittle, pilot and three-star general, is world-famous today.

Mother was having a hard time making ends meet. The storekeepers offered to carry her on their books, but she was too proud to let them. However, I noticed our baskets of groceries always seemed to have extra items in them when we got them home. A chance to repay our neighbors' generosity came when the great storm hit in the autumn of 1913.

A sixty-mile gale piled the shallow Bering Sea against the shore in crashing white foamers. The water rose ten feet in a few hours, wiping out the sandspit where the Eskimos had their camp and sending them fleeing to the tundra. For a time it seemed that Nome was doomed. Huge lighters were torn from their moorings and hurled like battering rams against the water-front buildings. Mammoth waves

swept under the pilings of the stores along Front Street, lifted them high, and smashed them into kindling, strewing sodden merchandise for miles along the beach. Mother and I watched from the window as the Snake River bridge went out. Electric cables snapped with a blinding flash, and Nome was plunged into darkness.

All that night, while the surf thundered and the wind screamed, cooks at the North Pole Bakery stood hip-deep in water before their ovens, working by candlelight to make bread for the hungry victims. Next morning we looked out on the wreck of a city: houses upside down, horses floundering in icy water, schooners driven clear across Front Street onto the tundra. The Eskimo mission was gone; our piano appeared a week later, twenty miles down the coast at Safety Roadhouse. The area behind the Board Wall was silt-covered and deserted. The terror-stricken girls had taken refuge in the upper story of the Elite Bathhouse. At the height of the typhoon the bulkheads had given way, and the building had collapsed into the sea. I asked about Toodles; no one could be sure but they thought most of the girls had been drowned.

Our house became a sort of community center. Homeless neighbors staggered to our doorstep and Mother took them all in, keeping the stoves roaring to warm them and sharing what food she had. Some of them had fled from their homes clad only in underwear, and were soaked and shivering. Mother opened her bedroom closet where she'd kept Dad's clothes

hanging neatly just as he left them, and handed out the garments one by one. I think that was when she first admitted to herself that my father might not come back.

Six

Nome never really recovered from the storm. Most of the merchants who lost their stores didn't bother to rebuild: there wasn't enough business any more. The winter of '15 found less than 1000 people in town. Only a couple of restaurants were running, and the Northern Saloon had been shuttered forever. Slowly but surely the big syndicates were squeezing out all the smaller miners. Staffs of lawyers from the States were combing old records, company engineers were resurveying the loosely paced-off Third Beach claims, and Outside monopolies were replacing the original prospectors who had discovered the gold.

A few stubborn old sourdoughs, like Big Hans, still hung on. He owned a fraction claim, 500 feet long by 12 feet across. He built a tiny shack and sat on the doorstep by the hour, smoking his pipe and panning just enough gold to pay for his grub. He knew that sooner or later the big companies would have to run their giant dredges across his sliver of ground, and then he could name his own price. Ophir and I used

to drive my dog team out to his cabin and share a pot of ptarmigan mulligan. "I ain't in any hurry," he would say, chuckling as he gestured toward the ground. "It's just like money in the bank down there."

I now had a team of good dependable dogs—five Malemutes—and I dreamed of entering the Ladies' Cup Races. But the rules required seven dogs to a team. I couldn't buy any more dogs at fifty dollars apiece, but I used to look covetously at the spirited racing teams that came dashing through Nome during the winter.

One team in particular caught my eye—a string of fourteen handsome gray huskies, partly wolf. They belonged to Frank Dufresne, a young deputy attached to the marshal's office. He had come to Alaska from New Hampshire, not for gold but for adventure. He always managed to stop by our boarding house when he was in Nome. He had twinkling blue eyes and a sly Yankee humor. Somehow he reminded me of a character in one of Dad's favorite books, *David Harum*. After a few visits I sensed it was more than Mother's cooking that caused him to halt his dog team in front of our door, and his efforts to conceal this amused me very much. I began to look forward to his calls; to watch him ask for more of Mother's Swedish meat balls and thin pancakes, and then forget to eat them as he looked at me across the table. One day I mentioned the Ladies' Cup Races to Frank, and his face lit up. "Why, Klondy," he said, "it so happens I've got just the seven dogs you need."

I didn't understand. "But I can't afford seven more dogs."

"I'm coming to that," he added quickly. "I'll take your five old Malemutes and call it an even swap." There was a curious pucker at the corners of his eyes that I came to know better in later years. "I'll even pick 'em out of the team myself, to make sure they're all alike."

He took off next morning with my five Malemutes in his string. I hitched his seven huskies to my sled, and found out why he was so willing to swap. They were alike, all right; they were ferocious, unmanageable fighting devils. They piled into each other, claw and fang, with bloodcurdling howls. I waded into the mess and swung the loaded butt of my dog whip to knock them apart. In the middle of the fracas, I heard Frank's dry New Hampshire twang behind me.

"Figured you might be needing me," he chuckled. "Maybe we better go out on the trail together a few times, till you get used to 'em."

"I don't need you or anybody else," I retorted, swinging my whip and booting dogs right and left. I realized he had followed me to lend a hand and I was pleased at his concern. At the same time, I was so mad that I never wanted to see him again. I was determined to show Frank he wasn't the only one who knew how to handle a dog team. "I'll tame these brutes if it's the last thing I do," I told him.

It took me more than a month, but I managed to break them. They turned out to be wonderful dogs, strong and fast, and I decided to enter them in the

Ladies' Cup Race, the year's big event for the women of Nome. The men would make book on their favorites in all the saloons along Front Street. Every lady in town who could beg or borrow a team signed up. Leonhard Seppala split his famous racing string into two separate teams, to take care of a couple of entries, and other girls combed the town for extra dogs to build up their totals to the required seven. There were combinations of Malemutes, Siberians, setters, staghounds, collies, German police dogs and Saint Bernards, and sometimes combinations of each other. Males and females were side by side in the towlines, leading to unexpected complications.

Practice for the big race went on for weeks. Novices who had borrowed teams would go out with the owners, acquainting themselves with the names of the dogs and learning commands like "Gee" and "Haw," as well as the trick of balancing the sled. Even though a strange lady was driving them, the dogs realized their real master was along, of course, and obeyed perfectly. This was why a lot of girls got the idea there was nothing much to this mushing business but hanging on.

The owner of the team held his lead dog by the collar as each lady driver braced herself at the starting line. The dogs knew a race was coming. They surged into their harnesses and rose on their hind feet and howled like packs of wolves in their eagerness to take off. Spectators lined both sides of Front Street in Barracks Square near the Coast Guard flagpole. Jessie Lehman, a new schoolteacher fresh from the

States, had drawn first place, and she gripped the handlebars tensely and stood on the brakes. The timer glanced at his watch and shouted "Go!" The team took off in a cloud of snow, made a beeline for its home, ducked into the dog barn, and lay down.

The second team got a little farther. Its tender-foot driver was a plump waitress at the North Pole Café, and the dogs went about a hundred yards before they swung around, trotted back to the starting line again and rolled over on their backs in front of their master, wriggling and wagging their tails affectionately. They all hung their heads in pretended shame when he bawled them out, but there was a man-to-man look in their eyes which seemed to say, "Wouldn't you have done the same thing if a lady'd been driving you?"

Most of the cheechako mushers had trouble getting past the telephone poles along Front Street. The sleds would progress with erratic starts and stops from pole to pole, occasionally dragging along a dog on three legs who hadn't quite finished. Once the teams got out of town, however, they resigned themselves to the fact that they might as well go around the course and get it over with, and they loafed along at such a leisurely pace that the lady drivers resorted to shrill bird calls and chirps and other queer sounds to urge them on.

As the team in front hit the open country near Bessie Bench, the drifts got deeper, and it lagged more and more until the team behind caught up. The inexperienced driver tried to pass, and both strings of

dogs tangled in a snarling melee. A third team raced up to see what all the excitement was about, and joined happily in the free-for-all. The snow was full of wrestling dogs, upset sleds, twisted harnesses and tow lines. The shrieks and squeals of the helpless lady drivers could be heard clear back to town, echoing thinly in the cold air. "If them voices ever freeze up and thaw out again at break-up," Big Hans muttered, "you'll think the geese have come."

My team of half-wolf huskies may not have been the fastest in the race, but the months of discipline paid off and I brought them home a winner. It didn't really matter who won anyway, because all the girls were cheered equally as they got back to Barracks Square. The lady racers lined up and Roald Amundsen, Alaska's favorite explorer, snapped our picture, which I have to this day. A few years earlier he had mushed his own dog team a thousand miles to discover the South Pole, and we were all awed by his tall impressive figure with its deep-set eyes and great hawked nose. Captain Amundsen never smiled, but there was humor in the little twist at the corners of his mouth. Everybody idolized him, and we were overwhelmed with delight when he invited us to his house for a party after the race.

He dragged a case of eggs from under the kitchen table, and told his Eskimo housekeeper to start cracking them for egg-nogs. It was late winter, and the eggs had been shipped from Seattle the previous August. Some of them were pretty ripe. Nearly every other egg wound up in the slop bucket, and a few actually ex-

ploded when the housekeeper opened them. Captain Amundsen stood over her; he knew that all eggs look good to an Eskimo, and he insisted on her using only the ones that were yellow or no worse than a pale green. She went through twenty-four dozen eggs before she filled a bowl, but after a certain amount of eggnog we didn't care if it did have a slight taste of sulphur.

We hadn't even bothered to take off our parkas after the race. We were all feeling gay, and everybody shouted for music. Captain Amundsen sent his housekeeper across the street to my house, to fetch my violin. I played "Alexander's Ragtime Band" while all the girls sang and danced on the carpet in their mukluks. Captain Amundsen sat in his chair, never smiling but quietly enjoying every minute. In his somber dedicated life as a Polar explorer, there'd never been much time for frivolity, I suppose, but he loved to see the rest of us have a good time.

Suddenly, on an impulse to cheer him up, I sat down on his knee and began playing "Pretty Baby." His stern expression never changed, and at first I was afraid I might have offended him; but then I saw the corners of his mouth turn up a little, and I felt his knee moving under me as he tapped out the rhythm.

I didn't see Frank Dufresne again until April, when he stopped at the house. He seemed a little sheepish. He'd had some bad luck on the Kuskokwim, and dis-temper had all but wiped out his team. "I'm sorry I unloaded that pack of fighting wolves on you,

Klondy," he apologized, his eyes puckering. "I'll make it up to you by buying the whole bunch back."

I was still mad. "The only way you'd ever get this team back," I snapped, "would be to marry me!" Realizing too late what I had said, I blushed furiously and ran into the house, slamming the door behind me.

The thought of marrying anybody right then was farthest from my mind, but I think it was beginning to worry Mother. I was going on nineteen, and she knew that sooner or later someone was bound to come along—maybe someone like Frank. And the last thing she wanted was to see me marry a foot-loose adventurer who might leave me the way Dad had left her.

She seldom mentioned my father any more, but whenever a boat arrived from the arctic she would make some excuse to go to the post office, wait till the mail was sorted and then walk home and sit staring out the window. But my future was preying on her mind, even more than her own troubles. Nome was virtually a ghost town now. All the other young people were leaving for the States. She wanted me to leave, too. It was her desire that I escape the lonely years of waiting she had known, and that I might have happiness and success and a career. At night she would ask me to get out my violin and play for her. The tears would stand in her eyes.

"If I could find some way to send you Outside, Klondy," she would say over and over. I knew she was thinking of Dad. "If only a letter would come . . ."

The letter came, but it wasn't Dad who supplied

the answer. It was his old partner. Blueberry Pete had died in Arizona, the formal legal notice read, and willed all his money to Mother. There was a small check enclosed, just enough to pay for my passage.

Mother walked down to the dock with me to see me off. The wooden sidewalk along Front Street was buckled, and withered brown grass stood between the missing planks. The street was dark in the late October afternoon, completely deserted. War had been declared only a few months before. Now the windows of the stores were cracked and vacant, and our footsteps echoed hollowly, like the sound of thousands of prospectors' boots that had tramped these same streets in the roistering days of the First Beach strike. Mother looked worn out; her color was still high and her eyes as dark and beautiful as ever, but she seemed as frail as a ghost herself. Suddenly I had a strange feeling that she was the one who was leaving, not myself; that I was seeing her off to some far land beyond the hills, where there would be no loneliness and she would find what she had always wanted.

The other passengers were already aboard the *Victoria*, anchored two miles offshore, and a freight sling was ready to lift me from the dock to the waiting lighter. We stood in the empty shed, under the corrugated iron roof. I kissed Ophir, and patted my lead dog, Sport, whose eyes were fixed on me mournfully. The men put my steamer trunk on the wooden platform of the sling, and I stepped aboard, gripping the ropes as they gave the signal to the winch. I tried to say good-bye to Mother, but I could only blurt out,

"Come back to the States. Come with me right now."

"I'll never leave Nome, Klondy," she said. "Your Dad asked me to wait for him. He'll come back."

The steam winch hissed, the chains hoisted the sling into the air, and I looked down at Mother for the last time. She lifted a worn little hand and waved.

Dad came back to Nome that winter, but he was too late. Mother had passed away a month or so before he arrived. I was in Seattle, where I was studying, when I got the cable from Big Hans. I never got to Denver. My brother, Ophir, told me the details when he arrived in Seattle on the first boat the following spring. He was twelve now, with Mother's blond hair and fair skin, but the set of his shoulders, the restless movements of his hands, reminded me even more of Dad. Big Hans had taken care of Mother's funeral. He'd sold his fraction claim to a syndicate to pay the expenses, and he had looked out for Ophir the rest of the winter and bought him his ticket to the States.

Ophir said that Dad had showed up in Nome one night a month or so after Mother's death. He was on his way from Candle to a new strike he'd heard about near the head of the Innoko River. He was still spouting the same big lies, Ophir jeered, with surprising bitterness for a boy his age. "All those wild promises about 'gold mansions and nuggets the size of boulders,'" he mocked, imitating Father's voice. "He wanted me to go with him, but I told him I'd die before I'd ever be a prospector like him."

In later years Ophir always said he preferred to let somebody else grub for gold; he'd handle it after it

was converted into nice clean bonds and securities. Today he is an auditor with the Seattle First National Bank, but he denounces Dad so bitterly that sometimes I suspect the same adventurous blood is in his own veins, and he's had to fight against it all his life.

When he had cooled down, we gossiped about old acquaintances. "By the way," Ophir said, "you remember that fellow Frank Dufresne that sold you the dogs? He went back to New Hampshire and enlisted. I heard he's in France with the Yankee Division."

I set up a cot for Ophir in the spare room of my apartment. I had taken a three-room flat in West Seattle, where I had a job playing in a movie theatre while I was studying. Back in the old silent days, the musicians in the pit would lift their eyes from the score sheet to the white screen above them and fit their music to the action of the picture. We'd create an emotional mood by a tremolo on the violin during a Francis X. Bushman love scene, or clop coconut shells together to imitate horses' hoofs in a Broncho Billy western. The audiences were getting to know me; they would buy tickets just to hear my violin solos, and sometimes in the middle of a picture they would send down a note by the manager and request a special number. One night, when Theda Bara was appearing in a slinky Oriental film, someone asked me to play "The Long Long Trail." It didn't seem exactly appropriate during a murder in an opium den, but the audience ignored the picture and burst into loud applause just as Theda was stabbed in the heart.

When the fighting in France was over, returned sol-

diers would call for their favorite war songs, "Over There" or "After They've Seen Paree." I did everything, popular ballads and semiclassic and classic arias. Eventually I organized a five-piece orchestra and we played dinner music at hotels around the Northwest. I had a class of my own now, giving violin lessons to make extra money. Ophir helped out by getting a job as a bank messenger boy.

I dreamed of the day when I would go to New York for a finishing course and be a concert soloist, maybe even at Carnegie Hall. Music was all I thought of, all that mattered to me now. At last I had my big break: I was offered a contract to travel east on the Orpheum Circuit.

I was so excited with the news that my feet scarcely touched the sidewalk as I sped up the hill to the apartment I shared with Ophir. There were voices in the kitchen. Ophir called out, "Klondy, guess who I ran into at the bank today!"

Ophir's companion rose from the kitchen table and turned, his blue eyes crinkling at the corners. "Still mad at me?" Frank Dufresne asked.

He had headed back to New Hampshire when the war ended, he told me, but everything in the East seemed dull after the exciting days at Nome. He had given up his job as a cub reporter on the Brockton *Enterprise*, and taken an assignment with the United States Bureau of Biological Survey, to travel all over the North on wildlife reconnaissance. His reports would help to fashion the new game laws for the territory. The renewable resources of Alaska, he claimed,

would prove someday to be worth a lot more than all the gold. "I'll drive my own dog team," Frank said—his eyes had the same faraway light that Dad's used to have—"and I'll be mushing over a wilderness of snow that no sled track has ever crossed before."

As I listened to him, I could see the limitless white arctic, hear the honk of wild geese over the Bering Sea breakers in the spring and the roar of ptarmigan flocks on the tundra. Suddenly I wanted to share in his adventure, to be part of Alaska again. My musical career faded in importance, and I had a feeling that Mother would have understood. Frank saw the look in my eyes.

"Remember those seven Huskies I unloaded on you?" he asked in a low voice. "Remember what you told me I'd have to do to get them back?"

Seven

There was no resisting this very persistent and persuasive Frank Dufresne. Not that I wanted to, because when we were together it was like being swept along on a flood of golden memories. All at once nothing mattered except that we would be going back to the land we both loved, sharing a new series of adventures. On the same day we were married, Frank bought our steamship tickets. I was a bride of less than three weeks when we headed back to Alaska, bound for the

northern country where my mother's efforts to create a home had ended so tragically—the land I'd sworn never to set foot on again.

It was hard to explain, even to myself, why I had changed my mind. I'd been happy in the States, making a professional name for myself with my violin, until Frank came along and upset everything by proposing to me. But I guess if you've ever lived in the silent North—if you've ever heard the howl of the Malemutes, or the crackle of the aurora borealis in the midnight sky—you have to go back. "The stillness, the moonlight, the mystery," Dad's friend, Robert Service, wrote once, "I've bade 'em good-bye—but I can't." So here I was, just as Mother had been twenty years ago, setting out for Alaska to create a home of my own. At least, I told myself, I wouldn't make the same mistakes that she had made.

It was midafternoon when we arrived in Fairbanks, but it was already dark and gloomy, because we were almost at the Arctic Circle, where the November sun shines only a couple of hours. The penetrating cold made my ears sting as we hurried down the dark street, carrying our traveling bags and hat boxes and my violin case. Frank had arranged by wire from Seattle to rent a house in town—the only one available. We were lucky to find it, because in winter all the miners crowded into Fairbanks from the creeks. He'd heard it was located in a nice neighborhood, and had all the modern conveniences. It even had electric lights, a luxury unknown to my mother when she arrived at Dad's mining shack on Ophir Creek in 1902.

A powdery snow was falling and the street lights were dim. It was hard to see the house numbers, but we finally spotted a "4" daubed in black paint on a tiny log cabin. Frank kicked the snow away and opened the front door.

It was even colder inside than out. Frank groped for the string of the overhead ceiling light and yanked it, but it didn't work. He struck a match and lit the stub of a miner's candle which was stuck on an oilcloth-covered table. Then he climbed onto a chair, unscrewed the bulb and shook it. "Bulb's all right," he muttered. "Must be the fuse."

"You get the fire started, Frank," I said, shivering in the light coat which I'd bought in Seattle for our wedding trip. "I'll run next door and borrow a fuse."

As I hurried out, I discovered one of the modern conveniences Frank had promised me. It was fifty feet to the rear of the cabin, full of heaped snow, with an open front facing the street. I made a mental note: Buy burlap tomorrow. I tramped a path to the house next door. The window curtains were drawn, but there was a crack of light and I heard a phonograph playing "Cecilia." I rapped quickly.

Someone called, "Who's there, darling?" and the door opened. A buxom lady in a kimono, with dyed henna hair and a spot of rouge on each cheek as big as a red apple, stared at me in surprise. The house smelled of whiskey and stale cigar smoke and perfume. The lady herself made me think of my old friend Toodles back in Nome. When I explained hastily what I

needed, she asked me to wait outside. In a moment she was back with a fuse.

"Nice to have you living next door, darling," she said, pinching my arm affectionately. "Hope to meet your husband someday."

Frank had a couple of birch logs burning in the stove when I got back. He screwed the fuse into place and suddenly the ceiling bulb illuminated the cabin. I looked around me and gasped. I'd seen rough-looking hovels as a child in Council and Nome, but this one was the worst. There was just one room. The log walls, chinked with moss, had been covered with wallpaper, now peeled off the cheesecloth backing and hanging down in strips. The only furniture was a sagging double bed, one small rocking chair and a straight-backed chair with the top knocked off, and the plank table. The rusty pipe from the stove zigzagged up through the roof, leaking smoke at every joint. There was a coffeepot black with soot, and a frying pan thick with hardened grease. I took a deep breath.

"It's cozy, Frank," I said. I could remember Mother saying the same thing to Dad. "I can't wait to start fixing it up."

Frank grinned, lifted me right off the floor in his arms and kissed me. "You're a real sourdough, Klondy," he said happily. "We ought to have some coal to make this fire last. I'll run next door and see if I can borrow some."

"No, you won't," I said quickly. "You'll stay right here."

While Frank was shoveling the last tenant's empty tin cans and worn-out socks and rubber boots into a corner, I unpacked the suitcases and hung our clothes on spikes in the wall. Already I was planning ways to decorate the cabin and make it homelike. "First thing tomorrow we'll give this place a good thorough scrubbing," I said as I worked, "and then we'll make some flour paste and glue that wallpaper back on. After that we'll buy a can of white paint and do all the woodwork and . . ."

Frank was looking at me in a funny kind of way. He said, "Klondy, I've been putting off telling you this, but I've got to leave early in the morning. Soon as I can get a dog team together, I'm heading out on a two weeks' trip down the Yukon. The Game Commission has reports of beaver poaching at Tanana." He avoided my eyes. "You start getting settled—the neighbors will help out if you need anything—and I'll be right back as soon as I can."

I sat down suddenly on the broken-backed chair. I knew the life my mother had led in Alaska, waiting for a husband who was always running off and leaving her alone. Was my own life going to follow the same lonely pattern, after all?

I managed to put on a brave smile, just as Mother had always done, when Frank took off early the next morning. I waved good-bye and glanced at the thermometer by the door. The temperature was dropping fast; it was already forty-five below. Fortunately our trunks had arrived. I opened them, took out my old

reindeer parka and fur boots, packed in mothballs, and put them on to keep warm. The cabin was freezing, and the stove didn't seem to be working right. The wood smoldered, but wouldn't burn. I tried to straighten the stovepipe to get a better draft. There was a dull thump inside. Black smoke began to curl through the gaps in the pipe and around the lids of the stove. The fire went out.

I raked out the charred wood and ashes into a bucket, and started all over again. This time I took pains to use plenty of paper and small kindling. The fire burned briskly for a few minutes, but soon died down, and oily black smoke poured out thicker than ever, covering my hands and face with soot. I couldn't even see, and I was afraid the cabin might be on fire. I didn't want to call for help, for fear people would think I was one of those silly cheechako women who needed a man around to start a fire. So I went outdoors and climbed up on the low, slanting roof of the cabin. I banged on the chimney with a stick to loosen whatever was inside, and hurried back into the house. It looked like the inside of a coalbin. The fire was out again.

I started from scratch once more. As the kindling took fire, soot and smoke belched out. I was so mad I grabbed the poker and smashed at the stovepipe with all my strength. There was a violent explosion. The lids of the stove lifted, the firebox door flew open, and the whole stovepipe collapsed in sections on the floor, scattering grime and creosote in all directions. Flames leaped out of the stovepipe hole toward the ceiling. I

expected the cabin to catch fire any minute, but I was so mad I didn't care.

While the fire in the stove was burning itself out, I took the sections of stovepipe outdoors, sat down on the snow-covered front steps and cleaned them out. By the time I finished, the stove had cooled a little. I fitted one end of the pipe back in place, telescoped the other sections together and stuck them up through the roof. I was black from head to foot. It was so cold in the cabin that the water barrel had frozen solid. I pictured Frank out on the clean white trail and I knew it couldn't possibly be as cold where he was. It was already getting dark; probably he would be having a fine meal at a warm roadhouse where he had stopped for the night. I thought of leaving Fairbanks then and there and going back to Seattle. Maybe Frank would be sorry when he returned and found I'd gone. I was so hungry and cold and lonely that I couldn't bite back the tears any longer, and just then I heard a knock on the front door.

"You in there, darling?" My neighbor pushed the door open and shuffled in. Her hair was in curl papers, she wore an old mink coat, and she was carrying a steaming pot. "Just thought I'd bring over some caribou stew," she said, "in case you was feeling hungry."

She fitted her wide hips into the little rocking chair and teetered back and forth as I wolfed down the hot stew. She paid no attention to the soot all over me.

"Might's well introduce myself, seeing we're neigh-

bors," she said. "I'm Kitty. Circle Kitty, they call me sometimes. I hit Circle back in '95; shot the Whitehorse rapids on a log raft with a troupe of other show girls. I was the belle of the outfit, and my waist was so narrow that a miner could span it with both hands when I pulled my corsets tight. When I sang at the Arctic Saloon, they'd holler and toss gold nuggets at my feet. I'll never forget Two Step Louie," she said. "He'd struck the richest pocket in the creeks, and he never wanted me to dance with anybody else. He even offered to pay me my weight in gold dust if I wouldn't. Of course, I didn't weigh much then."

Circle Kitty rocked contentedly, her hands clasped across her ample bosom like someone holding an armful of watermelons, and chuckled to herself as she talked.

"Louie was crazy about me," she went on. "For instance, I always used to like an egg for breakfast. Well, one night me and Louie had a little lover's spat, and he went out and bought up every single egg in Circle City. Eggs was selling a dollar apiece that winter, and it must have cost him a thousand dollars, but he was so jealous he bought 'em all, and smashed 'em on the street, so I couldn't have an egg the next morning. That's how crazy about me he was." She nodded her head. "I knew 'em all in those days, darling. Swiftwater Bill, Tex Rickard and Jack (Twin) Sullivan, the prize fighter. And Judge Wickersham, I appeared before him in court once," she recalled proudly. "I even knew Jack London back in Nome."

I sat forward with a start. "Why, I was brought up in Nome. Did you ever know a girl there named Toodles?"

"Toodles? She was my best friend. We lived behind the Board Wall together."

"Toodles was my friend, too," I said. "I knew her ever since we came up on the same steamer to Nome when I was five years old. I felt awful when she was drowned in the big storm of 1913."

"Drowned?" Circle Kitty's chair stopped rocking abruptly. "Listen, darling, it takes more'n a little storm to get rid of old girls like us. I saw Toodles just a few years ago. She was working Iditarod that summer, or maybe it was Coldfoot, or Poorman Creek. Nope, you can bet your poke Toodles is still very much alive some place."

The coffeepot was bubbling on the stove. I wiped out a couple of filthy mugs and filled them. Circle Kitty gazed placidly at the heap of tin cans and rubber boots in the corner.

"Previous tenant had to leave in a hurry," she explained. "He's doing six months for bootlegging. Don't worry, darling; you can get it all mucked out by the time your man comes home. I'll drop over once in a while and give you a hand."

I don't know what I'd have done those first two weeks if it hadn't been for Circle Kitty's visits. She appeared at the cabin at regular intervals, especially after my foot went through the floor one night. I was walking across the room, carrying the water bucket, when a couple of boards gave way and the linoleum

crashed in. I jumped back just in time. I was staring into a three-foot cache dug in the frozen ground under the cabin. There was a wooden case down there full of bottles, their caps all rusted and the labels missing. I didn't know what they contained, but Circle Kitty said it was imported Pilsner beer. She'd come over nearly every afternoon while I was doing my housework, and open a bottle. While I cleaned she would reminisce about the early years of Alaska when she was slim and beautiful and the miners flocked around her.

Slowly but surely I got things looking shipshape. I pulled the kitchen table over the hole in the floor. I scrubbed every inch of the walls and ceiling, glued the wallpaper back on and painted the woodwork white. There was only one window in the cabin. Somebody had shot a bullet through it and left a little hole with cracks spreading in all directions. I studied it a while, and then I got an idea. I traced all the cracks with black ink to make it look like a giant spiderweb. Then I cut out a paper spider and pasted it over the hole.

I had to keep the stove going day and night, because the temperature stayed at fifty-five below, the whole time Frank was away. The harder I worked, the madder I got. There he was, enjoying life on the dog trail, leaving his bride to slave alone. I couldn't make up my mind whether to say all the mean things to him that I was thinking or not speak to him at all, when suddenly he showed up one night.

I didn't even recognize him at first. Stubby whiskers stuck out all over his face, his frostbitten ears were

twice their normal size and his nose was just a swollen red blob. His eyes were puffed and bloodshot, but the twinkle was still there as he told me how much he'd missed me. He said that all the other dog mushers had holed up at roadhouses, and even the mail sled wouldn't risk traveling in that intense cold, but he'd kept pushing on day after day to get back home as he had promised. I was so ashamed I didn't say anything about my own small troubles. I threw my arms around him and hugged him. He hadn't bathed for two weeks and he smelled of dogs and smoked salmon, but I didn't mind.

The next morning the temperature rose and the big snow started. It floated down, piling higher and higher as it fell. The telephone wires turned into thick white hawsers, the top of each pole wore a mushroom cap of snow, and the little cabins in Fairbanks seemed to sink lower and lower each day as they settled into an ocean of feathery flakes. Back in Nome the wind had always howled and the snow drove horizontally across the Bering Sea. If you left a keyhole unplugged, you'd find a windrow of snow on the floor in the morning. But here in Fairbanks there wasn't a breath of wind all winter long; the flakes stayed where they fell and the first flake was still there at the bottom of the pile when spring came. After the violent blizzards of Nome, these seemed as peaceful and unreal as cotton snow on a Christmas tree.

I loved to wade down the silent streets, lined with white birches, past the little cabins huddled on the

bank of Chena Slough. Fairbanks in the '20's was an orderly village of about 2000 residents. It had never been a real stampede town, even at the height of the gold rush, and the people were easygoing family types, generous and friendly. I wondered whether Mother would have had the same problems if Dad had staked his claim here instead of the wild Nome country. The houses were made of logs, chinked with white clay, and looked alike from the outside, but each interior was different. The wives made their living rooms snug and cozy with ruffled cretonne curtains, bright slip covers and window boxes of geraniums and begonias. Many of the homes had greenhouses attached, where they raised giant flowers as well as lettuce, tomatoes and radishes.

The lights burned all day long in winter. As I looked through the windows at parents reading and children playing in front of the fireplace, I began to feel more secure. Frank had not mentioned any more trips lately, but he had to spend the day in his Fairbanks office, and I didn't like sitting around our little cabin alone. I'd become acquainted with some of the other wives in town, and to pass the time we decided to organize a lady's basketball team. We practiced every afternoon in the high-school gym. One of the substitutes on our team was a striking brunette named Marvel Crosson. Her brother, Joe, was a bush pilot who had come to Fairbanks to start a pioneer airplane service. Joe Crosson became world famous when he brought out the bodies of Will Rogers and Wiley Post

after they crashed near Point Barrow in 1935. Marvel became a noted flier herself; unhappily, she was killed in the Bendix Cup Races.

When I came home from basketball practice with my hair rumpled and my face red, Frank would look at me curiously. He was too much of a Yankee to ask me what I was doing, and I didn't tell him for quite a while. We had arranged to play the high-school girls' team on New Year's Eve, and I invited Frank to come to the game.

He looked at me in that sort of helpless way he had, and my heart bumped. I could guess what he was going to tell me. "Washington wants me to find out about the winter range of the white Dall sheep. I've got to take a dog-team trip into the high country. We won't be together on New Year's."

I thought of my mother, and I made up my mind right then and there that I wouldn't sit home alone as she had done, waiting for my man to come back. "We'll be together," I told Frank.

"But I just had a wire from Washington, honey. I've got to go."

"All right," I said; "I'm going with you."

We set out from Fairbanks at ten o'clock at night, because in midwinter it was actually brighter by moonlight than by day. The moon was full, twice as big as it looked in Seattle, and the shadows were sharp on the snow as we drove the dog team through a narrow trail along the Wood River bottom. The spruce forests were so dense that we could scarcely steer the sled

through them, and it was strange to think of the wind-blasted tundra around Nome where there wasn't a tree as far as the eye could reach.

One of us would take a turn at the handle bars while the other jogged behind or rode on the sled. Our team consisted of eleven pure white huskies, led by Jack Frost, a wise old trail master. The dogs loved the snow; they loped happily, their tails coiled tightly over their rumps, occasionally lifting their heads and whimpering or yipping eagerly as they caught the scent of some wild game or heard the tiny squeaks of the snowshoe hares.

This was the year of the rabbits in Alaska; the cycle of abundance had reached its ten-year peak, and thousands of shadowy forms leaped and bounded across the snow on all sides as we passed. Sometimes the heavy timber opened onto a forest meadow, filled with scrub willows, and the rabbits flitted like ghosts in the moonlight. Now and then the silence would explode without warning, as the dogs rushed pell-mell through a flock of roosting ptarmigan and they cackled and roared out of the willow tops.

We were dressed so warmly in our woolen underwear and fur parkas and Eskimo mukluks that we did not even feel the silent cold. Frank's only fear was that I might breathe too deeply of the subzero air and frost my lungs, and he made me wear a six-foot-long muffler of silk, which I wrapped around my mouth and nose. As the moisture of my breath froze on the silk, I would shift the muffler a few inches. By the end of the day's ride, the muffler would be solid with

ice, and I would thaw it out and dry it over the fire while we were making camp.

The temperature dropped steadily as we left the foothills and started into the high country. Below us in the canyons we could hear the river ice booming like salvos of artillery. Occasionally a spruce tree beside the trail would groan, as its heart sap froze and expanded, and explode like a stick of dynamite. As the sun rose briefly above the mountain tops, the thin air seemed to be filled with iridescent frost spangles, brilliant crimson and blue and green as they flashed in the sun's rays. Frank nudged me and pointed. A low bank of fog seemed to be drifting slowly over the frozen river.

"Caribou," Frank explained. "When it gets this cold, their breath and body heat form a cloud of steam big enough to hide them." As I watched, the cloud parted for a moment, and I saw a herd of fifty caribou climb the far bank and trot into the spruces.

The short day was nearly over, and the fading red glow in the south warned us it was time to start looking for a campsite. We rounded a bend in the canyon, and the sled dogs pricked their ears and yelped excitedly. A huge bonfire was glowing at the edge of the rock cliff, the flames shooting high and lighting the snow-covered spruce on either side. The carcass of a fresh killed moose lay on the ground, and a family of Indians moved around it, the children dancing barefoot on the warm rocks as the elders butchered the meat for the feast. Frank said that the Indians would stay here with the carcass until they had eaten enough

so that they could carry the rest home. They waved to us as we passed, and the light of the fire faded like the dying sunset behind us as we climbed toward timberline.

We halted in the last grove of trees, halfway up the mountain. Ahead of us the chiseled peaks of the Wood River range rose, tier on tier, 12,000 feet into the garnet-colored sky. The dogs lay down, panting, and in the sudden silence we heard a scraping of hoofs on the ridge directly above us. A dozen wild mountain sheep paused a moment like statues on the sky line, tossing their curled amber horns. As I raised my hand to point, they whirled and vanished.

The rule of the trail is always "dogs first," and Frank cut down a large spruce for their shelter, lopping off the upper branches to form a lean-to. I unlashd the sled, got out the bale of dog feed and threw each Husky a dried salmon. Then I helped Frank pitch an eight-by-ten tent with a canvas floor. We set up the camp stove with its stovepipe poking through a metal ring in the roof. While I carried in the grub box and filled the coffeepot with some hanging icicles from the trees, setting them on the stove to melt, Frank pitched another ten-by-twelve tent over the first one. The air space between the two tents made a natural insulation, and at sixty below the interior was warm and cozy as any cabin.

Supper over, we unrolled Frank's double eiderdown sleeping bag, hung our damp outer clothing from the ridgepole, and crawled into the bag in our woolen underwear. The soft snow under the canvas tent floor

was just like a feather-bed mattress. We could hear the swish and crackle of the northern lights. The tent walls were tinted with rainbow colors as the aurora borealis filled the sky. A great gray owl hooted once, soft and plaintive, in the spruce overhead. Not far away a she wolf called in the moonlight—a long, spine-tingling howl. From the other side of the canyon a male answered the mating cry with a shrill tremolo. I shivered in spite of myself, and Frank put his arm around me.

“Let’s see, Klondy,” he asked suddenly, “what date did we leave Fairbanks?”

“The twenty-eighth.”

“That’s four days ago.” He chuckled in the darkness. “This is New Year’s Eve.”

I don’t think I’ve ever been happier in my life. I was with Frank, on the trail, starting a New Year and a new life. I wondered, as I lay there, what other New Years would be like, after our child was born and I could no longer ride the moonlit snow trails with my husband. But I decided to face that problem when I came to it. Tonight we were together.

Eight

Dog teams blazed a thousand trails between the villages every winter. Apart from the snow trails, there was no road between Fairbanks and Nome. In summer the only highways were the rivers.



Klondy and her mother joining her father in Council, 1902

Klondy's father (extreme right) prospecting on Ophir Creek near Council, 1902





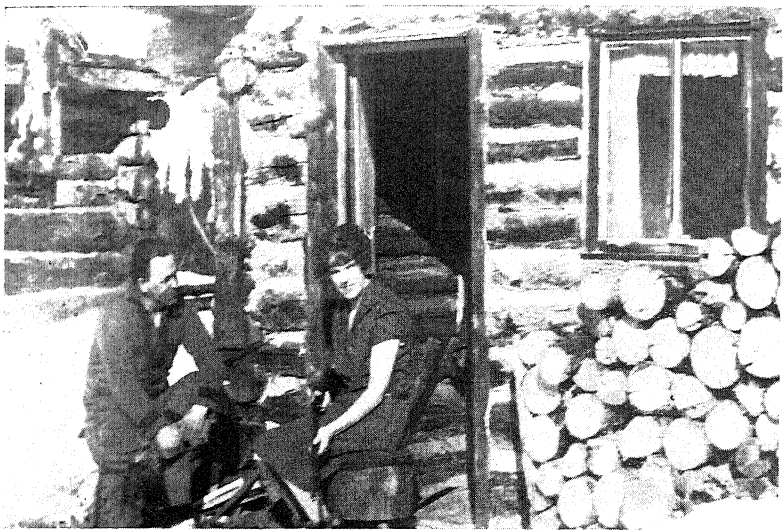
Eskimos: woman and babies at Nome (left); boy of Kashunuk in seal hide and eider-skin parka (right)

Klondy fishing for tom cod in winter, period between 1914 and 1917





Alaskan honeymoon: Klondy Nelson Dufresne and her husband Frank, dressed for the high country



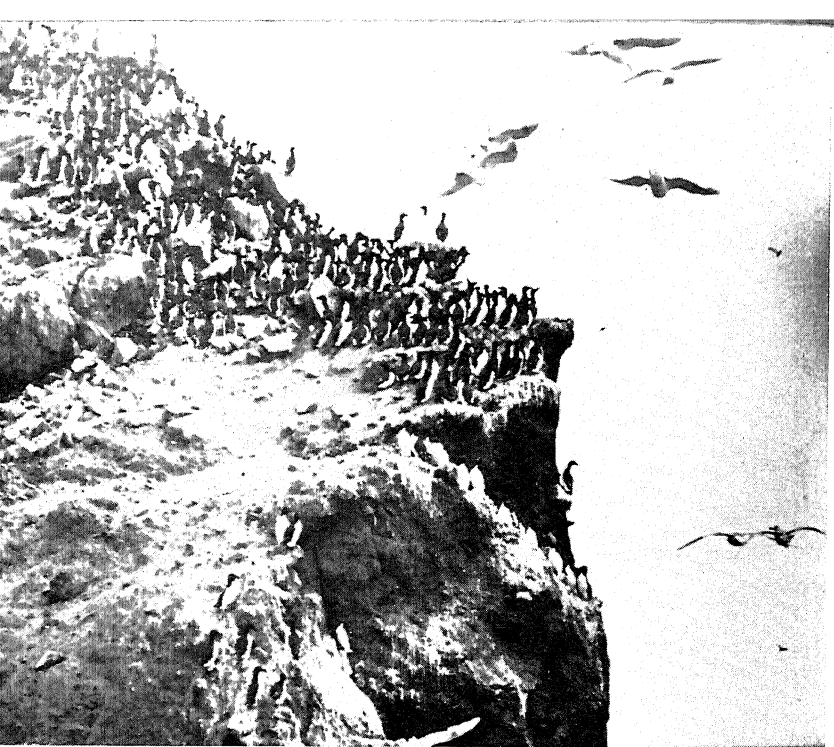
The Dufresnes' first home in Fairbanks

Frank on his power-driven houseboat Beaver, checking Indian beaver skins for the Alaska Game Commission





Klondy with the Dufresne dog team near Fairbanks



Arctic wildlife: flocks of waterfowl (top); reindeer herd along shore of Selawik Lake in summer—their antlers in velvet (bottom)



Life on the Yukon began at spring breakup when the crashing ice cakes swept down the raging flood waters toward the sea. The first stern-wheel steamer followed close behind, its paddles thrashing the muddy whirlpools, its stack belching spars and wood smoke. The Indian firemen stoked the boilers with four-foot logs. The massive hull with its gingerbread trimmings would zigzag across the river, following the shifting channel. Deck hands with long red-and-white poles stood in the bow, sounding the depths and shouting back to the pilothouse, "Deep six! Seven! No bottom!"

The captain steered his treacherous course by familiar landmarks on either bank: an eagle's nest in a cottonwood snag, a high-pole cache, an Indian cemetery on a hill, a burned stump that looked like a black bear. With a blast on his whistle that echoed for miles, he would heave his lines ashore at a native trading post, dump off provisions and take on sacks of furs. Then he would churn on to the next settlement. Sometimes he would pull up alongside the cut bank and buy a deckload of cordwood from a homesteader who had cut it that winter on speculation. Rex Beach worked this way one whole season, earning his grubstake to the Nome strike.

Behind the stern-wheelers came a whole flotilla of smaller craft, bound for the Bering seacoast—home-made naphtha launches, log rafts propelled by long sweeps, poling boats, dories and birchbark canoes. They looked graceful enough as they shot swiftly down the rapids, but it was a different story when they

reached St. Michael and started back upriver against the mighty current. The slim canoes would ride the reverse eddies along the bank, the paddlers ducking their heads under the overhanging willows; but the bigger boats had to buck the main channel, and some of them never made it. Over the years St. Michael gradually became a graveyard of deserted ships that couldn't get home.

Frank's vessel, the *Beaver*, was a powerdriven houseboat with a tunnel bottom, and a canoe strapped on top of the cabin house for a tender. It was made specially for him by the Alaska Game Commission so he could navigate the shallow Yukon tributaries in search of wildlife violators. As soon as I could travel again, after our daughter Virginia was born, I made the downriver trip with him in the spring. Ginny was about six months old, and the first thing I did was to cover all the cabin windows with copper screening, to keep the mosquitoes out and keep Ginny in. My main problem was washing and drying Ginny's diapers. I thought I had a brilliant idea, stringing them on a deck clothesline, so the breeze would dry them in short order. An hour later when I went up to get them they were coal-black from the exhaust of the gasoline engine.

The *Beaver's* clean cabin, with its polished brass and freshly painted woodwork, was heavenly after the log hut in Fairbanks. We had a private bedroom, a living room and a galley, all completely shut off from the engine room and pilothouse. I made some gingham curtains for the windows, and the cabin looked like a

little doll house inside. It was sheer luxury to toss the garbage overboard and watch it disappear, instead of keeping it in a slop bucket all winter. There was a real toilet that could be flushed with river water, and a hand pump in the sink. It was the first running water I'd ever had in Alaska.

The galley was so small that I could stand in one place and do everything—cook meals on a tiny oil stove for Frank and his engineer, Jack Warwick; wash the dishes in the sink, and bathe the baby on the galley table. I'd reach around behind me while I was holding her, take her bottle off the stove, carry her a couple of steps to our stateroom and put her to sleep in the bunk. The vibration of the engine made her drowsy. She would sleep for hours at a time while I went up to the pilothouse with Frank and sat on a high stool, watching the ever-changing panorama of nature along the Yukon's banks.

At every turn of the river, flocks of waterfowl would skitter across the surface ahead of us and lift into the air, wheeling back overhead. Frank called their names off as he made notes in his field diary: whistling swans, mallard and pintail ducks, Canada geese, sandhill cranes. Sometimes, as we neared the mouth of a clear-water slough, I would glance upstream at what appeared to be a large driftwood snag among the water lilies. The snag would lift as our boat passed, and the head of a giant bull moose would emerge, its antlers dripping and its jaws chomping on a wad of moss it had just cropped from the stream bottom. In the morning—it was bright daylight by three A.M.—we

would see hundreds and sometimes thousands of caribou standing on the bank, the forest of horns gleaming red in the early sunlight. They would wait until the *Beaver* was almost opposite them, then plunge into the river and swim across in front of us. We would have to slow the engine to avoid hitting them. They were so densely packed that Frank said he couldn't toss his hat in the water without hanging it on an antler.

Each Indian village we approached had racks of drying salmon lining the shores. Crude fish wheels turned with the current, and the floating fish boxes beside them were filled with king and coho and dog salmon, ling cod, pike and arctic shee-fish. Following the custom of the Yukon, we would pull up alongside and help ourselves to whatever we wanted for supper. If we preferred trout or grayling that night, we would poke the *Beaver's* bow into a little side stream and tie up. Frank would set up his fly rod and cast from the deck. When the mosquitoes were too bad, I baited a hook with bacon and lowered it through the hole in the flush toilet. I caught a lot of fish that way.

As summer followed summer, I began to worry about Ginny. She was getting old enough to crawl around the boat. I knew that if she ever fell in the muddy Yukon, her clothes would instantly load with silt and she would never come to the surface again. I'd catch my breath in terror when we visited a native village and she toddled up to a chained Malemute dog, which was usually half wolf, and petted it without fear; but, for some reason, no dog ever attacked her.

One afternoon, while Frank was making a patrol with the canoe, I took Ginny up the hill to pick blueberries. She got ahead of me. Then I heard her calling, "Look, Mamma, a doggie!" She was trotting toward a feeding black bear. The bear lifted its head and took a step toward her. Fortunately I had Frank's rifle—he made me carry it when I went ashore—and I dropped the bear with my first shot. It weighed about 200 pounds, but I managed to kick and shove it down to the water's edge. Frank's only comment when he saw it was, "Well, I guess we'll have fresh meat for a change." But I knew he was proud of me.

I worried too about Ginny being taken ill, until the *Martha Angelina* began her mercy patrols up and down the Yukon. The *Martha* was a Government hospital ship, run by Dr. Curtis Welch. His wife, Lou, acted as nurse. The ship carried a full line of drugs and medical equipment for any emergency, and the service to the natives was free. When the moccasin telegraph sent word ahead that the *Martha* was coming, the natives would crowd at the river landings, eager for any attention. Old men with canes, withered crones, children, and mothers with babies would troop up the gangplank single file, to be treated for real or imaginary ailments.

One summer the Indian Service seemed to want everybody's tonsils removed. The natives appeared a little surprised at this drastic treatment, but they cooperated cheerfully because it didn't cost anything. During this period of mass operation the *Beaver* had tied up alongside the *Martha* at Nulato, while I went

ashore to visit the trading post. As I started back to our boat I missed Ginny. After a frantic search through the village, I caught sight of a little towhead in the long file of Indian children, impatiently awaiting her turn. I yanked Ginny out of line just in time.

The natives were a little less eager to greet the Yukon dentist, Dr. Fromm of Nome, because he was a private practitioner and charged for his services. He had a collapsible dental chair and a portable drill which he operated with a foot tread, like an old-fashioned sewing machine. Dr. Fromm always figured it was simpler to pull a tooth than fill it, because he could take care of more patients that way.

The Yukon oculist was Dr. MacNab, who had sent to the States for a sample tray of ten-cent store eyeglass lenses. He had a canvas sign reading "Doctor MacNab" with a big pair of spectacles painted under the name. When he landed at a village, he would examine a customer solemnly, fit a pair of lenses into a wire frame, set the spectacles on the native's nose and hand him a chart to read. Since few of the Indians knew how to read, the glasses were usually pronounced satisfactory. Dr. MacNab would then pocket his fee and depart for the next fish camp.

Dr. MacNab was doing especially well that summer because of all the mouse tracks. The mouse was the economic barometer of the Yukon. When mice were abundant in the summer, there would be feed for the fox and ermine and marten, and furs would be plentiful the following winter. Traders furnished credit to the Indians in proportion to the number of mouse

tracks, and ordered heavier supplies for their posts. Even Frank was impressed enough to make a note in his diary, recommending a longer open season for trapping.

I loved our floating home on the *Beaver*, even though life was not always serene. One day the engine quit and the boat drifted onto a gravel bar, just barely under water. No amount of pulling and rocking could work it loose, so Frank decided to lighten the load. We set a couple of iron cots in the shallow water and piled everything on top of them, including Ginny and me. Frank and Jack Warwick worked the boat down the bar until she floated free, and scrambled aboard as the current caught her. I heard the starter whine, but the engine wouldn't fire. The boat drifted rapidly down the river and out of sight.

The Yukon was four miles wide at that point. I was perched with Ginny on a towering stack of oil drums, food cases and flour sacks, in a terrifying expanse of rushing water. The sand was being eaten away under the cot, and I could feel the pile teeter a little. By the time Frank started the engine and came back for us, I was shaking with fright, but Ginny was having the time of her life making paper boats and watching them bounce downstream.

As Ginny grew older, I could see more and more of my childhood self in her looks. She had curly flaxen hair and bright pink cheeks, and there was a little birthmark at the nape of her neck, just like Mother's and mine, that turned red when she was mad. She also had my knack of getting acquainted with strangers.

When Frank stopped at a native village to tag beaver skins, Ginny played by the hour with the Indian children. I would wrap her legs with toilet paper, to protect them from mosquitoes. When Frank tooted the boat whistle, she would come back, smelling of fish oil and chewing a black piece of jerked moose meat.

Sometimes I went ashore and visited with the wives of the trading post agents, gossiping about some neighbor five hundred miles away or swapping recipes. Mona Muller, the half-Indian wife of the trader at Kaltag, had a different way of fixing salmon: she would loosen the skin back of the head, and peel it down over the tail in one piece. Then she'd remove the bones, season the chopped-up meat with strong wild onions and sage, stuff it inside the skin and bake it. Mrs. Rothaker at Iditarod made a delicious jam out of half-ripe blueberries, which tasted just like gooseberries. My favorite recipe, however, was Mrs. Fischer's at Ruby, and was called Cranberry Catsup. She picked the cranberries right behind her roadhouse, and added vinegar, brown sugar, spices and horseradish as for regular catsup, but this tasted better. She made it when Robert Service boarded with her at Dawson, and he was very fond of it.

Sometimes I stayed on the boat and helped Frank with the beaver skins. The natives would assemble on the bank as we tied up, and toss armloads of pelts on deck. Sometimes the bow would be heaped with a fortune in rich dark furs. Frank inspected them one by one, to make sure they were taken during the open season. If the fat on the pelt had gone rancid, it indi-

cated that the animal had been trapped before the law allowed. But if all was well, the Indian would sign an affidavit, usually with an X. I would witness his mark, and Frank would clamp a serially numbered metal seal through the eye of the pelt; it could then be shipped to market. The beaver was the main source of revenue for the natives along the Yukon. We often tagged a half million dollars' worth in skins in a summer.

I enjoyed helping Frank with his wildlife work whenever he would let me, and I enjoyed it most of all when the work was a little dangerous. Occasionally when he stepped ashore, the trappers he challenged would put up a show of resistance, and without Frank knowing it I always kept the rifle handy, ready to back him up if necessary. The game violators were even more cunning than the foxes they trapped, so Frank had to be on the alert at all times. One afternoon, when we were chugging up the Yukon past the mouth of a tiny creek, Frank's quick eye spotted a crumpled white envelope bobbing downstream toward the main river. It didn't mean anything to me, but Frank stopped the boat at once. He slid the canoe off the deck, and I sat in the bow, holding the rifle across my lap, while Frank paddled silently upstream.

We moved so quietly that once I almost bumped my elbow against a cow moose drinking at the edge of the creek. We rounded a bend, and ahead of us was a small campsite. The trapper was as surprised to see us as if we'd dropped out of the sky. He had a pile of beaver pelts in his tent, and he swore up and down

that he'd taken them during the open season, but Frank saw fresh blood on the skins and he said he'd have to seize the whole bunch. The trapper shook his head in sad surrender.

"Just one thing I can't figger out," he said. "How did you know I was here?"

Frank's eyes twinkled. "I got a letter."

Once we nearly ran into serious trouble. Frank had heard about some illegal furs around Rampart, and the Indians told him of a wild-looking white man camped at the mouth of Little Minook Creek. They said he threatened to kill anybody who landed on his beach.

Frank figured he'd better look into it. We could see the tent under the trees as we stopped at Little Minook. I watched Frank walk up the beach. Suddenly a man came out of the tent, wearing a fringed moose-skin jacket and a wide Stetson draped with mosquito netting. Without a word he pulled an ax out of a stump and started toward Frank. I grabbed our rifle, jumped off the boat and ran up the beach. Frank backed a couple of steps, reaching behind him with one hand as he faced the man, and called to me. "Hand me that gun quick, Klondy."

The man halted in his tracks. "Klondy?" he asked. "You ain't Warren Nelson's little girl?"

He strode toward me, handing Frank the ax as he passed him. "Here, you hold this." He grabbed my hand.

"By God, y'are Klondy! I can see Warren written all over ya." He pumped my hand, but I was too startled

to say anything. "I was with your dad on the Third Beach Line. Ever hear him mention the Scurvy Kid? Why, I knowed ya since ya was a baby." He yanked me toward the tent. "Come on in and have some coffee," he said, adding absently to Frank, "you can come in, too."

The Scurvy Kid scaled his Stetson into a corner of the tent. He reminded me of a spawned-out dog salmon, with a hooked nose and pockmarks all over his face and snag teeth protruding in all directions. He poured me a mug of inky liquid. I took a swallow and choked.

"That's plenty strong," I managed to say.

"By God," he said, "I like real coffee. This coffee they make nowadays, you might's well dip it out of a moose wallow." He poured a cup for himself, and let Frank get his own. "I like my coffee strong enough so's after I make it I got to rebore the pot."

He stood up, yanked a thin, oily strip of smoked salmon from the ridgepole, and handed it to me. "Here, by God, have some squaw candy." He started chewing on another piece, and Frank rose and pulled down a strip for himself.

"Sorry I busted in on you like this," Frank apologized, "but I was looking for a fur trapper."

"Trapper!" the Scurvy Kid snorted indignantly. "Hell, I'm a prospector. I hit some rich panning up the creek here, and I don't want no strangers nosin' around till I get a chance to file my claim."

"I'll be glad to record it for you," Frank offered, "as soon as I get back to my office in Fairbanks."

The Scurvy Kid looked at Frank as if he were seeing him for the first time. He turned to me. "Hell, Klondy, this dude you're hitched to's got a little sense, at that. I like a man with guts and go," he nodded. "Your dad had plenty of guts and go."

"He had plenty of go, all right," I said, with a dark look at Frank, "running off and leaving his family all alone."

"That's what I mean, by God. He wasn't tied to no apron strings. He wouldn't stay in no swivel-chair office," he agreed, also casting a dark look at Frank. "He kep' on going, and he wouldn't stop for nothing. Why, him and me belonged to the vigilantes when we was here in Rampart. One time this gunfighter Wyatt Earp come into town, and your dad made him take off his six-shooters and hang 'em in Tex Rickard's saloon." His yellow teeth ripped off another chunk of squaw candy. "Tex run a nice saloon in Rampart before he drifted down to Nome. He used to stage prize-fights in back, just whipsaw planks and fellers fighting in their socks. Your dad and me hung around there all the time." He looked up at me suddenly. "How long since you seen your dad?"

I thought a moment. "Over ten years."

"Hell, I seen him just a couple of years ago," the Scurvy Kid said. "He come through here on his way upriver. He was following another gold rumor."

I didn't want to ask him, but I couldn't help it. "Where did he go?"

"A prospector don't never tell nobody where he's going," the Scurvy Kid snapped. "Prob'ly he didn't

even know himself. But you'll catch up with him one of these days. You're bound to run into him again."

Somehow I knew in my heart the Scurvy Kid was right—sooner or later I would see my dad again. I hated him for deserting my mother. He was a braggart and a liar and he broke her heart, but nevertheless he was my dad. That night as I lay in my bunk on the boat, listening to the water lapping along the sides, the *Beaver* and the Yukon and even Frank seemed very far away. I was a little girl again. Dad was holding me in his arms—I could feel his pointed mustache tickle as he kissed me—and I knew I still loved him.

That summer we saw more and more airplanes buzzing overhead, flying up and down the Yukon. They would wag their fabric wings in greeting as they passed, but to Frank it was almost as though they were thumbing their noses. He was growing increasingly impatient with our slow and cumbersome means of travel, and he began referring to the *Beaver* as an old tub. We knew all the bush pilots by this time—A. A. Bennett and Ben Eielson and Bill Lavery, who took violin lessons from me, and Joe Crosson, of course. Frank recognized all the planes that flew over. "There's Joe now," he would say, "on his way to Nome." We'd be only a few more miles upriver when Joe would fly over again, heading back to Fairbanks. Frank would say, "I'm going to ask the Game Commission to trade in this tub," he'd threaten, "and get a plane."

"But Ginny couldn't go along in an airplane."

"Klondy," Frank said, pronouncing my name in that slow way which always warned me some bad news was coming, "you couldn't go along either, I'm afraid. There'd only be room for the pilot and me." He saw the hurt in my eyes, and he tried to console me. "But think how much shorter my trips would be."

"But think how many more of them you'd take," I said.

The airplane was changing Alaska rapidly. We'd talked with my old friend Roald Amundsen, and with Sir Hubert Wilkins, and they said it was inevitable. Dog drivers shook their fists at the fragile Jennies and Swallow biplanes, because they knew their own days were numbered. Already the pilots had taken most of their passenger business; now they were carrying furs and even starting to handle the mail. Resentment was building along the Yukon. Once, as we rounded a river bend at Koyukuk, we saw a float plane stuck on a sandbar. A crowd of boatmen and mushers lined the bank, jeering at the pilot. Nobody offered to row out and help, so Frank tossed the pilot a rope and towed him loose.

Even the roadhouse proprietors fought the airplane, since their business depended on feeding and lodging sled drivers. A few of them put up signs: NO DOGS OR PILOTS ALLOWED INSIDE. One day we stopped for lunch at Manley Hot Springs Roadhouse, run by Dan Green and his wife. Joe Crosson parked his plane at the landing and came in just as we were finishing. An old-time dog driver named Pretty Pete started ribbing Joe at once. "That bailing-wire boxkite of yours

wouldn't last two minutes in a blizzard," he scoffed. "You'll never get people to risk their necks in a cock-eyed contraption like that."

"They're already doing it," Joe Crosson replied. He was a handsome-looking youngster, as dashing as Douglas Fairbanks, and he had a nice easy grin. "We've all got more business now than we can handle. The airplane's here to stay, Pete."

"That's right, Joe," Frank cut in. "It's going to be the making of Alaska someday. The Game Commission's even talking about getting one."

"Bosh," snorted Pretty Pete, slamming down his coffee cup in disgust. "It'll never take the place of the good old sled dog." He shoved back his chair. "Think I'll stroll over to the springs and take a hot bath."

"You going to take a bath, Pete," Dan Green asked slyly, "or just rent a towel?"

Everybody laughed, and Frank explained to me in a whisper that Pretty Pete was sweet on a girl who had taken over the bath-towel concession for the summer. A lot of sporting girls liked to hang around the hot sulphur springs in the summertime, waiting for the miners to come out after a bath—fresh, clean and feeling romantic. "Ain't she a little old for you, Pete?" Dan Green goaded.

"Maybe she's old"—Pretty Pete shrugged as he shuffled out the door—"but I ain't so young myself any more."

We started back to the *Beaver*, and I realized Ginny had wandered off again. Frank went down to the boat to help Jack untie and get the engine going, while I

started calling. Soon Ginny came trotting along the plank walk from the bathhouse. I took her hand and we hurried to the landing. We were several miles downstream before I got around to asking Ginny where she'd been.

"I was talking to the lady that sells bath towels," she said. "She's a very nice lady."

"How did you happen to get acquainted with her?"

"She said I looked just like a little girl she used to know once, with the same golden curls and pink cheeks. She asked me who I was and I told her Virginia Dufresne, but she didn't know anybody by that name. She said whoever I was she bet I had a nice mommy and a nice home, and she told me to always be a good little girl and not come in this place any more."

"What was her name, Ginny?" I knew before I asked.

"I don't know, it didn't seem like a real name. A man came in and called her Toodles."

We stopped at Manley Hot Springs on the way back upriver at the end of the summer, but I was too late. Toodles had drifted on, and I never heard of her again.

Nine

Early in May each year the ice went out, and then we found out who'd won the Nenana Ice Pool. Everybody in Alaska bet a dollar on the exact day, hour and min-

ute that spring breakup would take place. Some people bought as many as a hundred chances apiece. The total pool ran up into many thousands of dollars. If several people guessed the same time, they had to split the bonanza among themselves; but still the lucky winners would receive what amounted to a sizeable fortune in those days. One year the janitor at the Northern Commercial store was sweeping the floor when he got the news; he dropped his broom, left it where it fell and never came back.

Nenana was nothing but a railhead on the Tanana River, but for a couple of weeks each spring it was the most important town in Alaska. The marker was a tripod anchored in the river ice right in front of the railroad station. A slack wire led from the tripod to the town clock, which was connected by another wire with the railroad-yard whistle. When the moving ice shifted the tripod enough to tighten the wire, the clock stopped, and that blew the whistle. The telegrapher in the Signal Corps office flashed the big news to every settlement in the territory.

Excitement built daily as breakup time drew near. People who had bet on an early day would pray for thawing weather. People whose date was later would cheer each cold snap. I had chosen midnight of May 6th, and it began to look as though I had a chance to win this year. The ice always went out of the Chena Slough in Fairbanks about twenty-four hours ahead of the Tanana, and promptly at midnight on the fifth there was a grinding and crunching sound. Suddenly the Chena was free. I could scarcely sleep that night.

All the next afternoon and evening I walked the streets of Fairbanks with everybody else, frequently stopping to glance at the bulletin board in the Signal Corps window. Midnight came and went. I realized I'd lost again, so I tore up my ticket and went home. I'd barely crawled into bed when the bells started ringing in town, and a few minutes later I heard shouting in the street. Somebody banged on our door. Circle Kitty burst into our cabin, wrapped in her kimono, her eyes shining with excitement.

"Klondy, I hit the jack pot!" she shrieked, flinging herself on the creaking double bed and throwing her arms around Frank and me. "I won a big enough chunk to retire! Look at me, darling! I'm rich!" She started back out the door to spread the good news up and down the street. "I'm going to buy a case of champagne and a new mink coat," she called over her shoulder, "and I'll have the biggest damn automobile in Fairbanks!"

Kitty's new automobile arrived from Seattle a month later. It was a huge, black, nine-passenger Pierce Arrow limousine, with velvet upholstery and a speaking tube to the chauffeur's seat. Maybe it was just a little secondhand, but it was the biggest automobile in Fairbanks. Even if it had been an ordinary limousine it would have attracted attention, for owning a car in Alaska in the '20s was a mark of distinction. When the first automobile appeared along the Yukon a couple of years earlier, there was only a mile or so of road in the village, but the owner charged two bits for the round trip. Airplanes were already taken for

granted, but pilot Sig Wien told me that he flew an Eskimo all the way from Kotzebue in the Arctic just to ride in an automobile in Nome.

Affluence brought respectability to Circle Kitty, and respectability brought marriage. Like so many former dance-hall girls who had come to Alaska during the gold rush, she wound up as the wife of a prominent citizen, a well-to-do widower, and became an esteemed member of the community. Instead of making girls like Kitty hard, their early days of dalliance along the primrose paths had given them a deeper understanding. They were warm, big-hearted and a soft touch for anyone down on his luck. They were faithful to their husbands and loyal to their friends. I knew that if I were ever in trouble I could count on Kitty.

Her wedding reception was the social highlight of the season. The glittering soiree was held in her new home, a two-story frame house on Cushman Avenue. There was a case of champagne, which Kitty had obtained through a prohibition agent who was one of her former friends, and a new mink coat, which she draped carelessly over the piano so everybody could see it. With a stately smile, she moved among the guests on the arm of her new husband, who was half a head shorter; her henna hair freshly waved and the spot of rouge on each cheek reduced to the size of a red plum. She asked me to play a violin selection, so I gave the guests Liszt's "*Liebestraum*," in double-stops. Kitty was a little tiddly on champagne by this time. After I finished, she pinched my arm and whispered hoarsely, "That's beautiful, darling, but how

about something with a little more zip to it?" I started to play "The Wedding of the Painted Doll," but checked myself in the nick of time and switched quickly to "Cecilia." Kitty burst happily into tears and kissed her husband.

Later that evening, as Frank and I were leaving, Kitty pulled me to one side and hugged me affectionately. "I'm so happy, darling," she confided. "After all these years I been kicking around—Circle and Dawson and Nome, never any place I could call my own—you don't know what it's like to have a real home and settle down."

"No, Kitty," I said thoughtfully, "I don't."

After six years of marriage, I was still practically living out of a packsack. Frank had to travel all the time on his job. Our home was usually the cabin on the *Beaver*, or a roadhouse, or a shelter hut along the dog trail. Now the time was coming when I couldn't travel with him any more. Ginny was five, almost ready to go to school, and I was going to have another baby. I wondered when we'd ever settle down and have a real home like Kitty's.

"Why don't you put in for a transfer to Juneau?" I asked Frank, as we walked back to our tiny rented cabin. "You could be the head commissioner for all Alaska someday."

"I don't want to be in a swivel-chair office," Frank retorted. "I belong on the open trail. There's hundreds of thousands of miles in Alaska that no white man has ever seen. Why, the surface hasn't even been scratched . . ."

"You sound like Dad," I interrupted hotly. "You sound more like him every day."

I guess Frank noticed that the birthmark on my neck had turned a warning red, because he dropped the subject, just as Dad always did.

That was the summer of the buffalo hunt. I know it sounds ridiculous to be hunting buffalo in Alaska, but Washington was always transplanting some new species to the Arctic, like muskox or Chinese pheasants or yaks. Frank had to take care of them all. The buffalo arrived at Fairbanks in crates, after a three-weeks' trip from Montana. They had to be transported another ninety miles by truck to Big Delta, the nearest good range. One buffalo crate would fill a truck, and Frank figured that the total cost of transportation would break the Game Commission. He decided to try the same trick that Tom Sawyer used in whitewashing his fence. He told the people in town that the buffalo belonged to them, and they had a right to share in all the excitement. Everybody donated trucks and their services, the women made sandwiches and coffee, and a gala caravan set out for Big Delta. E. B. Collins, the mayor of Fairbanks, made a rousing speech, and all cheered as the buffalo were turned loose. It was the nearest thing to a rodeo that Fairbanks ever had.

Frank noticed that one of the bulls had been injured in the crate, and limped as it wandered off. Several days later the Indians reported that a big buffalo had left the herd and was lying down in the willows. They said that grizzlies were circling around, and Frank became concerned. He didn't want the bears to

acquire a taste for buffalo meat. Finally he decided to put the injured animal out of its misery. I left Ginny in Kitty's care, and rode to Big Delta with Frank in a pickup truck.

It was noon before we located the main herd, feeding in a patch of wild peas, but the big bull was nowhere in sight. We walked the gravel bars all afternoon, scanning clumps of bushes for any sign. It was getting dark when we came to a thicket of willows. Frank pushed through the brush while I walked down a dry stream bed. I heard a crash in the willows, and a short explosive grunt. I whirled to face a huge bearded head and black horns. I'll never forget how he looked at that instant; his emaciated skin hung in folds, and his green eyes were glazed with pain.

He started toward me. I yelled "Frank!" and began to run. The bull stumbled after me, dragging his injured leg and coughing. Once his leg gave way and he sprawled on the gravel. I made a little distance, but he struggled to his feet again and rapidly closed the space between us. My boots spun on the loose pebbles. I could hear his labored breathing above the smash of gravel behind me. Suddenly he pitched forward and lay still, and I realized I had heard a shot.

Frank came out of the bushes, his rifle smoking. He was as shaken as I was, but his tone was casual. "You know," he remarked, "that's probably the first buffalo anybody ever killed in Alaska."

That night on our way back to Fairbanks I told Frank there was going to be another baby. He was delighted, of course, but did seem a little disturbed.

"I've been planning a long trip to last the rest of the summer," he confessed, "all the way down the Yukon to the Bering Sea and Nome. It's the last trip of the *Beaver* this year, and now you can't come with me."

"I'm not that far along yet," I said. "I'm coming with you, and so is Ginny."

I'll never forget that trip. As the *Beaver* passed Kaltag and moved down the Lower Yukon toward the Bering Sea, the whole character of the country changed. Five hundred miles from the mouth of the river, the Indian camps abruptly disappeared. For the next hundred miles there was no human settlement of any kind. Then, at Anvik, the first Eskimo villages showed up. The river broadened until it was ten miles wide in places. The current slacked and the water level rose and fell with the tide. Spruces along the banks had yielded to sedge and giant rye. From the pilothouse I could see for miles in every direction, as if we were sailing over an endless ocean of waving green grass.

Navigation was getting harder. As we approached the delta, the Yukon split and split again into scores of smaller rivers, fanning out in a maze of sloughs and shallow ditches across tidal flats 150 miles wide. Frank and Jack Warwick compared charts together, and studied the turbid water. Sometimes our bottom would drag across a sunken meadow, and I would hold my breath. I knew that if the *Beaver* went aground at high tide she might never get off again. Jack would stand in

the bow with a pike pole. Frank would scan the horizon through his binoculars for any Eskimo camp site that would indicate the direction of the main channel. It took us two whole days to grope through the labyrinth of the Yukon mouth, but at last I could smell the sea, and notice the milky-green expanse of open water curving into a gray nothingness.

Black swarms of ducks and geese spattered off the sloughs, as thick as mosquitoes on the tundra at Nome. Fat-bellied eiders and scoters, who had just shed their wing feathers, thrashed wildly ahead of the boat, trying in vain to rise, and swerved to one side just before the bow ran them down. Ginny laughed and clapped her hands. A couple of startled cranes leaped from the salt marsh, taking off in disjointed flight. Curlews and plovers circled the pilothouse, whistling shrilly, while sandpipers lifted off the mud flats in sheets, their wings flashing in the sun like heliographs as they banked and turned in unison.

Frank was making entries furiously in his field diary, but his eyes missed nothing. He nudged me suddenly. From the pilothouse, looking across the low bank at a brackish pond, I saw a dozen female beluga whales lying in the shallow water. One snow-white cow was nursing her calf. The hulking twelve-foot mother had rolled on one side to expose her breast, and the bluish cigar-shaped baby floated at right angles to her, nuzzling her with its blunt head out of water. Later we passed a school of beluga bulls at the entrance of the bay, waiting for the cows to return from their calving grounds.

Now at last we saw our first signs of human life. Far on the horizon I noticed three poles stuck upright in the mud, with small human figures silhouetted against the sky. Following a wide bend in the channel, we came to a cluster of empty skin kayaks. Frank tossed the anchor onto the sloping mud shore. We leaped overboard, slithered through the oozing clay and climbed to the dry tundra above. A white-haired Eskimo and two young boys, all dressed in goose-skin parkas, were stringing a woven fish net around the triangle of poles. The old Eskimo ran to shake our hands, his squirrel-bright eyes blinking genially. "*Adegah!* Good! Glad to see you. White man all time my friend." He beamed down at Ginny. "*Kabloona* baby bring good luck to-day maybe."

My curiosity couldn't stand it any longer, and I asked Frank what in the world they were doing. He told me they were hunting geese.

"But where are their guns?"

"Probably they can't afford guns," he said. "Most of these Hooper Bay tribes use arrows and spears, just as their ancestors did before the white man came."

I watched the boys stretch the net around the poles in a *V* shape, leaving one side of the triangle open. I could hear faint shouts from far off; tiny heads bobbed up and down above the grass tops a mile away. As they came nearer, the beaters began to close ranks. The old chief signaled us to lie down and keep very still. I raised up on one elbow, peeked through a clump of sedge, and saw tiny forms scurrying ahead of the drivers. They darted through the open end of the

trap, piling up at the point of the triangle, and struggled to poke their heads through the netting. They were young eider ducks and geese, not quite ready to fly. Among them were a few adults still in the molting stage. As the captive birds milled around and tried to turn back, the beaters closed in rapidly, yelling and waving their bird spears—slim sticks with three serrated ivory prongs bound with sealskin—and helped the two boys close the gap in the net.

Quickly the hunters wrung the necks of the birds and stuffed them into the kayaks. The old Eskimo chief watched his two boys roll up the net, jerk the poles out and load them in his skin boat. He waved to us and shouted "Goo'-bye!" as he paddled upriver in the wake of the other kayaks, bound for the site of the next goose drive. Since the tide was full, flooding all the reefs and sandbars, Frank decided it might be safer to stop here for the night. I cooked a young speckle-belly goose the Eskimo chief had given us, and we crawled into our bunks.

I don't know how long I'd been asleep when the anchor rope broke. The tide had been going out steadily, leaving the bow of the *Beaver* resting on the mudbank and the stern hanging in space. Unnoticed, the rear end had sagged bit by bit until the boat was tilting at a steep angle. Its weight snapped the anchor rope suddenly, and the *Beaver* slid down the slippery clay bank and dived sternfirst into the river. The first thing I knew, water was pouring through the cabin windows and surging into our bunks.

I grabbed Ginny. Standing waist-deep in icy sea water, I fought my way up the slanted deck, through the rapidly filling living room, to the high bow. Frank helped me over the side and up the bank. It was the clammy moment of darkness just before the dawn, penetratingly cold, and a brief squall of rain added to our misery. The *Beaver* lay half submerged. Frank and Jack concluded the stern was lodged on the bottom, so at least it wouldn't slide down any farther.

I could feel Ginny shiver in my arms, and my own teeth were chattering. Frank got my duffel bag and some blankets out of the forward locker. We changed to dry clothes and wrapped the blankets around us. The first red streaks of daylight were just showing in the east, when I heard paddles coming downstream with the dropping tide. Suddenly the old Eskimo's voice rang out directly below us, "Plenty trouble maybe." Several kayaks rode the water like a flock of gray geese. The Eskimos looked at the *Beaver* in silence.

The chief called to Frank, "More better bring white woman and baby village sleep tonight. Daytime fix boat maybe."

Frank and Jack unstrapped our canoe from the top of the cabin, slid it into the water, and Ginny and I got in. Jack stayed with the *Beaver*; he said he wanted to bail it out at low tide, so it would float with the next rise. Frank loaded an oil stove and our emergency ration box into the canoe, and groped under the water in the flooded galley for some canned food.

"You don't need to bother about all that!" I shouted to him. "We can get along. I've lived with Eskimos back in Nome!"

"Not Eskimos like these," Frank replied. He lowered a sopping carton into the canoe. "These tribes around Hooper Bay are some of the most primitive people left on earth."

Frank had to paddle hard to keep up with the fleet of kayaks, bobbing downstream on the outrushing tide. Dawn was coming fast. The whole sky was filling with orange light, and every detail was suddenly sharp. For the first time I could see Ginny's eyes. They were wide with excitement as she watched the broad-backed natives far ahead of us, rolling their shoulders as they alternately dipped their paddles on one side and then the other. The twittering of sandpipers and the quacking and honking of ducks and geese rose from the marshes. Now and then I could hear a deeper organ note as a raft of Old Squaw ducks in the bay serenaded the sunrise.

A dissolving mist revealed the village of Kashunuk at the end of a point of land. It seemed to be floating a few feet off the ground. Directly above it was a second village just like the first, only upside down. The inverted mud huts of the mirage rested on the roofs of the real huts, shimmering in the orange dawn. Each kayak skimming ahead of us had another kayak paddling upside down above it, and double strings of eider ducks, flying back to back, rippled in identical flight across the milky green sea. Women and children hurried out of the huts as we approached, each tiny

figure balancing another one upside down on its head. Suddenly the inverted figures vanished. The mirage was gone, and I was landing at the strangest village I've ever seen.

Ten

The old Eskimo chief escorted us proudly to his own igloo, the best in the village. It was nothing but a few driftwood logs leaning against one another, thatched with willow and covered with clods of mud in which grass had taken root. I was so cold right then that the hut looked like the Olympic Hotel in Seattle.

A crowd of thirty or forty Eskimos, the entire population of Kashunuk, followed us in awed silence, staring particularly at Ginny. The chief explained that most of them had never seen a white child before. The Eskimo youngsters wore short goose-skin parkas that only came down to their navels, and their bare legs were caked with blobs of blue clay. They reached out with their fingertips and touched Ginny's golden curls wonderingly. Ginny extended her own hand and felt their straight black oily hair. She'd never seen an Eskimo child either.

We stooped to crawl through the low entrance of the igloo. The only light came through a piece of walrus gut stretched over the opening in the roof. The interior was warm, although the ashes were long dead

in the sunken fire pit. Frank told me that wood was so scarce in this treeless country that the natives could seldom afford to light a fire. Around the pit, the clay floor was covered with woven grass matting and seal hides. The chief's two wives sat on either side of the igloo, their legs stuck straight out in front of them. The older one had a face like a dried prune; she was sewing some glossy loon necks together with sinew, holding the bone needle only a few inches from her eyes. The younger wife, naked to the waist, was nursing an almond-eyed infant.

We found a place to sit down, and the chief handed us wooden bowls filled with some thick liquid. Frank downed his without batting an eye, and watched me as I gulped mine. I thought the top of my head was going to come off. It was rancid seal oil, smelling horrible and tasting even worse. It burned inside me all the way down, as if I'd swallowed scalding coffee. A moment later I broke out all over in perspiration.

The chief scraped together a few chips of wood and got out his fire-making tools. Holding an ivory drill in his teeth, he bent over the pit and revolved the drill rapidly with a small bow which he sawed back and forth. Frank stopped him, because he knew how precious fuel was. He set up our oil stove instead. The two wives scrambled back in fright as they saw the blue flame shooting upward. Eskimos watching through the door gabbled excitedly. Frank put our collapsible frying pan on the stove and opened the water-soaked carton to get a tin of beans. He swore under his breath as he discovered he had brought a

dozen cans of strawberry jam. Fortunately we had some soup in the emergency grub box. We heated that for breakfast.

While Frank was busy, the chief produced a contribution of his own: several raw fish heads and little white squares of beluga whale skin which had been buried in salty clay for six months to cure them. "*Muktuk*," he said, smacking his lips. "*Adegah*, good." I bit into a square of the *muktuk*, but I couldn't finish it. It tasted like fermented chestnuts. The chief shouted something through the door, and handed an Eskimo boy a fine net woven of human hair. The boy was back in a couple of minutes, the dripping net filled with glistening blue sticklebacks no bigger than kitchen matches, all flopping and leaping. The boy grinned at Ginny, popped several live fish into his mouth like peanuts, and chewed them with relish. Ginny promptly took one, but spat it out when it started to wiggle, and glared at the boy resentfully.

To show our appreciation of the chief's hospitality, Frank opened a can of jam and handed it to him. He and his wives dipped their fingers into it and licked them loudly with delight. On our way out of the igloo, we gave the rest of the cans to the villagers. Soon everybody was grinning broadly, their faces covered with strawberry jam and goose feathers; the town was ours. I noticed a little toddler sucking a lump of cube sugar, and discovered that Ginny had given away our entire sugar supply. She'd found out how to be popular, too.

When the tide turned, Frank took a few husky

young Eskimos and paddled back with the strong salt current, to help Jack get the *Beaver* started. Before leaving, he warned me that he might not return until very late. Would Ginny and I be all right alone? I glanced around me at the smiling friendly faces.

"Don't worry," I said, "I feel at home here already."

After Frank had gone, I went for a stroll through the village. The chief's younger wife came along as guide, carrying her baby slung on her back in a loop of her parka. She knew a little English, and I remembered some Eskimo from my Nome days, so we got along fine. Ginny skipped along beside me, the whole population of the village tagging behind. The paths were gooey clay, and I gave Ginny a pickaback ride over the low spots. The chief's wife, noticing that I was pregnant, confided that we had something in common.

"Me same as you," she smiled, patting herself. "One on back, one in belly."

The other igloos were even cruder than the chief's—just hollow mounds of mud, like muskrat houses. Malemute dogs slept on the roofs. Beside each hut was a rack partly filled with tomcod, drying in the sun, and the skinned carcasses of eider ducks, geese and loons. The only gun in the whole village was a rusty double-barreled musket. The natives could not afford ammunition. Trading schooners came around only once a year, and the Kashunuk people had nothing to offer except a few crudely woven baskets and an occasional seal hide or fox fur. For food and clothing they depended on whatever they could catch and kill.

Hunting was their whole life. Even the children made little arrows and spears, and sneaked through the grass, stalking mice.

At the end of the village was the cemetery, a forest of tall poles on which were tied spears, kayak paddles, a weathered gunstock and a teakettle. These were the prized possessions of the departed, whose remains were doubled up and crammed into small boxes at the base of the poles. The Hooper Bay Eskimos do not believe that anyone really dies. He just goes to some other land to start life all over, and he will surely need his spear and paddle.

One little igloo was set apart from all the rest. A couple of women seemed to be standing guard, and one of them handed a dipper of water to the prisoner inside. This was the home of the virgins, the chief's wife said. When a maiden reaches puberty, she must spend a month in this house alone. Then she is free to come out and marry the man of her choice. The marriage does not become permanent until a child is born. A woman feels ashamed if she is not with child, and if she does not become pregnant in a few months, she is permitted by tribal custom to take another husband. The same custom applies to the men, the chief's wife added.

The chief, who doubled as medicine man, had disappeared early that morning and paddled alone in his kayak to a little sand island in the bay. Through Frank's field glasses I could see a thin column of smoke on the island. The chief's small figure danced around it. He threw chunks of blubber on the fire to

make the smoke black. He thrust his spear, paddle and kayak into the dark column to "purify" them, and jumped through the smoke himself a couple of times. Then he stared out toward the ocean. Suddenly he sprang into his kayak and hastily paddled back to the village. He told his people that the long-awaited fall run of salmon had started at last. Everyone threw nets in the river and, sure enough, they were soon filled with fish. I looked through the glasses again, and saw a couple of whales in the bay, driving the salmon upstream. But everyone else in Kashunuk was happy to believe that the medicine man had delivered the salmon himself.

That night, in answer to popular demand, the chief repeated his medicine-man dance all over again at a celebration of the salmon catch. The villagers gathered in the *kazhim*, or council house, a big mud hut used for tribal rituals. They squatted in a circle on the packed clay. The chief was dressed in his witch-doctor parka of brittle walrus stomach, hung with seal teeth and beaks of loons which rattled as he danced. His face was concealed by a wooden mask carved in the shape of a fish, with a fringe of black cormorant feathers. Everyone pretended not to know him as he crouched and leaped and stamped his feet on the floor, yelling, "*Ai-yi-yi!*" but when he turned I recognized his white hair. All the Eskimos rose and chanted in unison, "*Ai-yi-yah!*" The chief bounded out through the door. A moment later he strolled back in, minus his medicine-man costume, and hunkered down with the others.

They passed around seal oil and fish heads and *muk-tuk*, which Ginny and I politely declined, and began to tell legendary stories. The best goose hunter in the village contributed the tale of the Clapping Mountains, illustrating his story with elaborate gestures. This was the native explanation of why fewer ducks and geese came back in the spring than departed in the fall. According to the narrator, who emphasized his point by leaping up and down and occasionally smacking his forehead, all the birds in the world have to fly through a narrow pass between two high mountains. Now and then, without warning, the two mountains would clap together. At this point the narrator clapped himself on both cheeks with such force that he sat down abruptly.

The chief had a story about an Eskimo hunter who was always running away from his home and family. I missed a couple of Eskimo words along about here, but the chief began flapping his arms and cawing loudly, so I gathered that the husband turned into a crow. The husband flew home to explain what had happened, and his wife shot him. This story sobered everybody, and the party broke up soon afterward.

Early next morning Frank showed up with the *Beaver*. He asked me whether I'd minded his being gone all night. I looked at him coldly. "I thought you'd turned into a crow," I said. He didn't know what I meant.

All the Eskimos in Kashunuk gathered on the beach as we boarded the boat to depart. I actually hated to leave; Ginny even cried a little as she shook hands

solemnly with the half-naked children. The little boy who had caught the sticklebacks tried to give her his Malemute puppy, but we couldn't let her keep it. I saw Frank slip something to Ginny and whisper, and she gave the little boy Frank's jackknife. All the villagers waved and called "Goo'-bye! Come back soon maybe!" and the *Beaver's* propeller started pounding. Jack took the wheel, while Frank and I stood on the stern watching the village grow smaller and smaller in the orange-red sunrise. All at once a second village appeared above it, the inverted roofs balancing for a moment on the tops of the igloos below. I caught my breath. "It's just a mirage," Frank smiled. "It isn't real."

I watched in silence as both villages, the real one and the mirage, dipped under the horizon. I thought of the Eskimo families living together, happy and content, in poor little mud huts but huts they could call their own. It was real to me. It was more real than my own life seemed just then.

It took us a week to get to St. Michael. The engine was fouled with salt water, the knuckle gear grated, and the bent rudder made it hard to steer. Jack refused to go any farther. The *Beaver* would have to be hauled out for repairs, Frank said, and that would require a couple of weeks. He decided we would ride the mail boat the rest of the way across Norton Sound to Nome.

The thought of Nome made me tingle all over. I hadn't realized until then how much the memory of

my early years there filled my heart. The glittering beach where I had worked my little rocker in the yellow sands, the swaggering gamblers, the tinkle of dance-hall pianos along the crowded streets, the cries of exultant stampeders who had struck it rich were all woven together in a silver cord that bound me to the past. I put my arm around Ginny, as the mail boat ploughed north hour after hour, and tried to make her feel the excitement I had known. "I was a little girl just your age when I saw Nome for the first time," I said. "It was a magic city with streets of gold, shining in the sun like a fairy story."

It was getting colder. The Bering Sea wind built steadily, and icy waves slopped against the side of the little mail boat. A fog bank loomed ahead. We drove into it, with the freezing mist chilling us to the bone. Somewhere in the gray void we heard a dull roaring mixed with shrill neighs, like a herd of wild horses. Our bow pushed suddenly through the curtain of fog. In front of us, a square mile of open sea was filled with great bobbing heads. A pack of walrus massed around the boat, their bristling mustaches standing straight out, brandishing their yard-long yellow tusks angrily as we passed through them. The mists closed behind us again, and the sound of their snorting and bellowing faded away in the distance.

The boat stopped at Golovin to leave a sack of mail. Ginny and I hurried ashore to visit Molly Dexter, the Reindeer Queen, at the trading post where Mother and I had stayed once on our way down from Council to rejoin Dad at Nome. The roadhouse was shabbier

than I recalled, and for some reason it seemed smaller. Molly was gone; the place had changed hands several times since, and the man in charge didn't seem to remember her very well. I stood near the roadhouse window, looking up toward the mouth of the Niukluk. All the spruces had been logged off, the autumn hills were bare, and it was hard to picture the beautiful winding stream I had floated down on the river scow with a tarpaulin sail and a tow horse riding on its deck. I was glad to get back aboard the mail boat again.

We left Golovin and crossed the Bering Sea toward Bluff, following the very route that Captain Swenson had sailed in the *Duxbury*, when he yanked his whistle cord and listened for the answering echo from the rock cliff. The *Duxbury* had been wrecked, the mailboat skipper said. Captain Swenson had run on a reef in the fog, and his boat was pounded to pieces in the surf. The mist resounded with the same shrill cries, like hysterical laughter, as the kittiwakes and sea parrots on the ledges answered our own whistle. This was the place where Mr. Brower's horses had gone through the ice, and I shivered with the recollection as I told Ginny about the long, dangerous stage ride across the frozen sea. "That seems like an awful slow way to travel, Mother," was all Ginny said. "I don't think it would be much fun."

The birds on the high bluffs were restless. We could see them as the mail boat rode out of the fog north of Bluff, rising high and milling far out over the water. Their nesting sites on the cliffs no longer held them; small flocks would circle impatiently, waiting for their

rendezvous with the main flight from the north. The great fall migration had started, emptying the arctic of bird life. It was like a rushing river, fed by more and more tributaries, swelling to a mighty flood that swept southward ahead of the winter.

The longer we traveled, the more migrating flights filled the sky, drifting like smoke across the horizon clear to Siberia. Enormous flocks of glaucous gulls and murre were coming all the way from Chamisso Island in the arctic. Little auklets from the Diomedes buzzed past. Tufted puffins pedaled low across the water, their red beaks shining and their yellow mustaches streaming behind them, frowning intently like riders in a bicycle race. Shore birds banked in great clouds, alternately silver and black as they dipped against the sun. Even the eiders were moving south, bound for the Aleutian Islands and the warm Japanese current.

Now the thrilling cry of honkers filled the sky. Straggling flights of snow geese looked like skeins of white lace, and the emperor and cackling geese followed in endless formations. Pintail ducks with shiny white breasts streaked by, uttering their shrill nasal whistles. Most spectacular of all were the black brant, barking like excited beagles as they swept overhead on their way to the beaches of Baja, California. They would charge the vessel, almost touching the rigging as they went by. A quarter of a million brant must have passed us during the forenoon, Frank estimated. All the birds were heading in the opposite direction; we seemed to be the only life moving north.

The red ball of the evening sun was low over the

Bering Sea as Nome came into sight at last. A crimson glow tinted every window along the waterfront, and my hand trembled with excitement as I gripped Ginny's shoulders. She stared at the drab stretch of sand and the square buildings like packing boxes strewn along the skyline. Her lip quivered.

"Is that the magic city with streets of gold?" she asked me.

The old Golden Gate Hotel was closed for lack of business. We stayed in a rooming house over the Board of Trade Saloon, which now sold near-beer and soda pop. Frank had to leave early the next morning on a short trip to Sledge Island, twenty miles up the coast. The Sinuk Eskimos had reported polar bears there, and he wanted to investigate. He climbed into a skin umiak with an outboard motor, and chugged out of the mouth of Snake River, past deserted jetties that had once been crowded with schooners and river scows. Ginny and I walked back up the silent street. The boardwalk had rotted away entirely in places. It was safer to walk in the mud. Ginny wrinkled her nose at the boarded-up, sagging buildings.

"Come on," I told her quickly, "I'll show you the pretty house with the stained-glass window where I used to live."

Many of the stores were padlocked, and the ones that were still open seemed to be empty of customers. Instead of prospecting outfits and pack boards and miners' No. 2 shovels, the windows displayed tourist trinkets: fake gold pokes filled with sand, necktie

clasps of crossed pickaxes, and miniature gold pans with "Souvenir of Nome" printed on them, made in Japan. Nome was living in its past, I could see; maybe I'd been doing the same. I stopped in at the bank a moment to say hello to my old friend Grant Jackson. He tried to be optimistic about the future. "There's no more gold strikes to look forward to," he admitted, "but we're trying to get some money from the government to open up a tin mine. And they're talking of trawling for codfish out in Bering Sea. That might bring a little business into town."

Front Street seemed to get dingier as we strolled toward the little house with the stained-glass window. We passed Eagle Hall, where Rex Beach had once done his blackface act in the minstrel show; there was a plank nailed across the door, because the floor had heaved badly. The Presbyterian Church stood deserted; I tried to think how many years ago I had played my seven-dollar violin at the benefit there, and Big Hans had brought all the miners from the saloons to raise enough money to send me to the States. Then I saw ahead of me the house where I had lived. My step quickened, and then I slowed again.

The little house was being used as a dog barn. I could hear somebody's team of Malemutes growling, and through the sagging door I saw the dogs chained to the wall of the living room. Part of the roof had collapsed; a buckled sidewall was propped up with slanting poles. I looked for the stained-glass window, but there was nothing except a gaping hole. Ginny tugged at my sleeve.

"Where's the pretty house, Mother?"

"I don't know," I said slowly; "I guess it isn't here any more."

I walked back along Front Street with my head lowered, not even wanting to look around me. Nome itself was like the little house; it wasn't here any more. It was just a mirage, resting upside down on top of what it used to be—a reflection of the past. Some years later in the fall of 1933 I read about the great fire that swept the waterfront and destroyed every building in the old town; but that afternoon as I walked with Ginny I knew in my heart that Nome was gone already. It lived only in my memory.

Someone called my name, and Al Lomen ran across the street and embraced me. He introduced himself to Ginny. The Lomens were a fine old pioneer family of Nome. Al's father had been the Federal judge; his sister Helen and I had competed in the Ladies' Dog Races together. He'd known Mother and Dad and Big Hans. I started to ask, "I don't suppose Big Hans is still . . ." but I couldn't finish.

"Hans?" Al Lomen smiled. "Oh, he's hale and hearty." He's dredge master now with the Hammond Consolidated Syndicate at the Bessie Bench. Why don't you borrow my pickup this afternoon and drive out and see him?"

As Ginny and I were driving out to the Third Beach Line, I kept thinking of what Dad had said to Mother once. He'd predicted that the big syndicates would take over the country someday; that hydraulic nozzles

and giant dredges would glean every flake of gold in the country, clear down to bedrock. Now it had happened. On either side of the road I could see a wasteland of tailing piles, the pebbles washed of their last trace of color. They looked like the bare bones of a carcass picked clean and left to bleach in the sun.

The syndicate was working the Bessie Bench at the foot of Anvil Mountain. The dredge that Big Hans operated was the size of a three-story house, floating in the center of a deep pond it had excavated for itself. It reminded me of a crippled bull moose lying in a mud hole and feeding on the last shreds of moss off the bottom. I helped Ginny along the spindly gangplank that led to the dredge, and we climbed steep stairs to the control room inside the groaning monster.

Big Hans recognized Ginny first, because she looked like me as a child. He shouted, "Klondy!" turned over the controls to his assistant, and swung me off my feet. Then he picked up Ginny and kissed her. "She's a ringer for you," he grinned, "just like you are for your own mother!" He held her in his lap as we sat in the control room, raising our voices above the steady roar of machinery. "Did your ma ever tell you, Ginny, about the time she was your age and I drove her to Ophir Creek and I spilled her right out of the sled into the snow?"

Through the window of the control room I could see the lifeless moraine of gray mud and rubble, stretching in every direction. "Where would Dad's old Solo Mine be, Hans?"

"Right over there"—he pointed—"under that heap of stones. We worked it again last month for the third time. There's nothing there any more."

"There's nothing anywhere any more," I said, staring at the desolate ridges of tailings. "Look at this whole country, Hans. What can they ever do with all this mess?"

"Well, now, these tailing piles might come in handy," Big Hans reasoned. "That little airplane field we got at Nome keeps sinking through the permafrost every year. If they'd use this rubble to build a landing strip, it could hold the biggest planes in the world." He studied me thoughtfully. "Something you ain't telling me, Klondy? I could always read you like a book. What's the matter?"

I blurted out the whole story of Frank's going away all the time. I loved my husband, of course, but I wanted to have a permanent home of my own. I told Big Hans about the new baby coming, and how I couldn't go on trips with Frank any more after that. What was I going to do then? If the Government offered Frank a job in the main office at Juneau, I said, maybe he'd give up his field trips and we could settle down.

"I'll send a letter to President Harding, by God!" Big Hans roared, pounding the table with his enormous fist. "I'll get all these other old sourdoughs to write, too, and mebbe if he gets enough letters he'll have to offer Frank the job. I met this feller Harding when he was here in Alaska a few years ago and . . ."

"Harding's dead, Hans," I interrupted. "Herbert Hoover's President now."

"He is?" Big Hans was taken aback for a moment, but he recovered quickly. "Well, Hoover's a mining engineer himself; he'll listen to an old shovel stiff like me. I'll write him a personal letter."

Eleven

We were back in Fairbanks just in time for the big masquerade ball that was held every year on Hallowe'en. The new baby was almost seven months along now, but I wanted to go anyway. Frank objected, of course. He didn't like to dance, but he insisted he was thinking of my own good. Besides, he had a very important field trip coming up at that very time.

"Do you know what day Hallowe'en is?" I asked him.

He thought for a moment. "It's the thirty-first of October, isn't it?"

"Frank," I reminded him, "it's our wedding anniversary."

I guess he noticed the birthmark on my neck starting to get red, because he didn't object any more.

I began working on my costume the next morning, remembering the gown that Mother had worn in 1903, when she went as the Nugget Queen, back in Council.

She had gilded hundreds of pieces of cork, I remembered, and sewed them all over her white satin wedding dress, with ropes of nuggets around her neck and arms and even down her long train. She was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen, and I figured that if I made a costume just like hers, I was bound to win first prize.

Fortunately, the fashions of the day didn't emphasize a small waist as they did in Mother's time, so my being pregnant didn't matter much. I decided to eliminate the train, because the current style called for skirts just to the knees. I didn't have any real satin so I bought shiny sateen and made a dress. It looked more like a maternity gown than a queen's raiment, but I was sure the gold nuggets would fix that.

Instead of going to the trouble of finding corks and crumbling them, I saved time by dunking raisins in the gilt pot. The nuggets didn't glitter like Mother's corks; in fact, they were on the darkish side and looked as if they were part quartz. Rather than make a rope of raisin nuggets, I wore my real nugget chain and locket filled with gold dust I'd panned myself out at Dad's mine. It seemed a little small after I put it on, and my bobbed hair didn't give quite the same effect as Mother's long golden braids. But I set a cardboard crown on my head and assumed everybody in Fairbanks would recognize that I was the Nugget Queen.

Frank had put off getting his own costume ready, as usual. In fact, it wasn't till the afternoon of the ball that he asked me what he should wear. I told him to

get out his Tuxedo, which he hadn't worn since our wedding. While he was shaking loose the moth balls, I took the stoppers out of my perfume bottles and stuck them in his stiff shirt front for diamond studs. The top off the vinegar cruets, dipped in green ink, made an emerald ring.

Frank looked in a mirror and asked what he was supposed to be. I wasn't too sure, myself, but I had another inspiration. I stuck playing cards in the band of his wide-brimmed hat, placed a fan of cards in his breast pocket, stuck some more in his vest and stuffed the rest of the deck up his sleeves.

"You're the King of the Gamblers," I said. I wasn't too proud of his getup, but at least the Nugget Queen would have an escort for the Grand March.

We had moved to a new apartment by then, over Rose's Restaurant on the other side of Chena River. It was quite a distance to the Pioneer Hall where the masquerade ball was held, so Kitty and her husband called for us in her big black nine-passenger Pierce Arrow limousine. Her husband was driving. Frank got in front beside him, and Kitty and I sat in the rear. She and her husband had decided to go as Pierrot and Columbine. "I'm not exactly sure which is which," she confided, "but he's one and I'm the other."

Kitty's husband was dressed in a tight woolen union suit, with black triangles sewed all over it. Kitty wore a fluffy ballet skirt, which was almost six feet across when she got inside it. Her ballet slippers had wide grosgrain ribbons spiraled around her ankles, and she

carried a wand with an electric-light bulb in the tip, which she could flash off and on. We admired each other's costumes as we climbed into the car, and settled back in state. Kitty picked up the speaking tube and said to her husband, "You may start now, dear."

I couldn't dance, so I sat regally in a corner of the hall, like a queen holding court. Frank got bored with being a queen's consort after a while, and wandered around through the crowd, greeting everybody. Each time he shook hands, playing cards fell out of his sleeves. At last the Grand March was called. Frank took my arm and we paraded with the other contestants in a slow circle before Mayor Collins, who was presiding as judge. Everyone was looking at us, I noticed, and I was sure my costume would win. When the Grand March ended, I waited impatiently for the announcement.

Mayor Collins awarded the men's prizes first. "Best sustained character," he called out, "the King of the Gamblers."

Nobody moved, and Mayor Collins repeated, "The King of the Gamblers." People turned around, looking toward us, and Frank came awake suddenly. "Hey, that's me," he exclaimed, starting forward.

I jerked him back. "Don't be silly," I whispered sharply; "they couldn't possibly mean you."

But he walked across the waxed floor to the platform and Mayor Collins handed him the first prize, a frozen turkey.

Frank chatted expansively on the way home in

Kitty's limousine. All his friends had been congratulating him. His face was flushed, and he was feeling no pain. The rest of us were rather silent. Nobody else had been mentioned; in fact, the judges weren't even sure what the gilded raisins on my costume stood for; one of them thought I represented the annual grape harvest. Kitty and her husband said good night briefly, and we climbed the stairs to our apartment. Frank set the turkey proudly on the mantel.

"What a night," he murmured, hooking his thumbs in his vest and teetering back and forth on his heels. "Yes, sir, what a night."

I handed him a letter I'd found under the door. He read it, nodded complacently. "People seem to be appreciating me everywhere," he beamed. "The bureau says they've been getting letters from all over Alaska, suggesting that I go down to Juneau with the main office. They want to know if I'd be interested."

"You'll tell them yes, of course?"

"Well, I don't know," Frank said. The perfume-bottle studs were glittering in his shirt front. "It would mean giving up all these field trips, and who else could take my place up here?"

I controlled myself with an effort. "But you could make a name for yourself in Juneau," I urged, "and we'd have our own home."

"My home is over the horizon." Frank waved an arm, and a couple of playing cards fell out of his sleeve. "I'm an explorer. I want to follow the trail of the wild geese . . ."

"Oh, Frank, go take that costume off," I said wearily.

Our son Franklin was born early in January. Frank was attending court down in Anchorage when the baby came, but Kitty was right there to help me. She took care of Ginny until Frank hurried back. He had to be away a lot that winter. His territory covered more than half of Alaska, a region almost as wide as from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mississippi. Kitty visited our apartment almost every day, giving me a hand with the housework or looking after the children while I was washing clothes or mixing feed for the new litter of sled-dog puppies in the back yard. Ginny and little Franklin were drawn to her warm, easy-going ways, and she worshipped the children; like so many other old-time dance-hall girls, she'd been starved for real affection. She remained calm and unruffled, even when I was on edge.

One day in 1925, when Franklin was about three months old, Kitty came in and discovered me changing the baby's diapers and weeping.

She said matter-of-factly, "Here, darling; I'll finish putting those diapers on him. You go slosh some cold water on your face." I came back in a moment; Franklin was cooing contentedly on her ample lap, and she was giving him his bottle. "Now, then," she asked me, "what's it all about?"

I showed her a telegram from Washington that Frank had read me that morning. "The Bureau of Biological Survey has offered to transfer him to the

main office. It's his big chance to be director someday. They want us to move to Juneau right away."

"But that's what you want, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said, "but he doesn't. He's just had another offer to head a survey party into the Canadian arctic, to locate the main nesting grounds of the lesser snow geese, and band them and then follow their migration all the way down to the Gulf of Mexico. He'd be gone six months at least."

Kitty put Franklin in his crib. "What's Frank going to do?" she asked.

"I don't know. I'm afraid he doesn't want to settle down in any office." I guess my voice sounded hopeless. "He's starting a little trip to Fort Yukon tomorrow, and he says he'll think it over on the trail. He'll have his mind made up by the time he gets back."

Kitty waddled back across the room, sat down and looked at me thoughtfully. "I got a hunch, darling," she said. "Go with him tomorrow."

"But I can't," I protested. "Ginny's going to school, and there's Franklin . . ."

"I'll take care of the kids. You go, Klondy. I got a hunch." There was a shrewd light in Kitty's eyes.

She drove over to pick up the children as we were leaving next morning. We were making the trip by dog team, because Frank wanted to take a winter caribou count at Eagle Summit on the way. I was wearing my fur parka and mukluks, the first time I'd had them on in more than a year. Kitty waved as I climbed into the sled. "If you happen to stop at Circle," she called, "say hello to any of the boys that might remember me."

We followed the new Steese Highway north from Fairbanks, past Chatanika and the Cassiar, and up Twelvemile Hill. The road over the passes was drifted deep with snow. It was tiresome traveling along a well-graded truck route past mile posts and occasional road signs, instead of blazing our own trail through the spruces and willow thickets filled with game, but the caribou range crossed the Steese Highway at the top of the divide, and this was the quickest way to get there.

As we reached Eagle Summit above timberline, I looked down the white slopes and saw thousands of caribou digging through the snow for reindeer moss. I missed the great spreading racks of the bulls. The males shed their antlers after the rutting season, but the cows carried theirs until after the fawns were born in the spring. I watched a big bull paw a hole in the snow to get at the frozen lichens; just as he exposed them, a cow hooked him in the side. He meekly trotted off to dig another hole. Several caribou were standing motionless on the skyline, their eyes fixed on the slope behind them. Frank handed me his glasses, and I made out the dark silhouettes of five timber wolves creeping out of a draw. He took a long shot with his rifle. One wolf spun in the snow and the rest loped away.

As we toiled along the winding highway through the Crazy Mountains toward Circle, the going was getting harder and the mile posts seemed farther and farther apart. Frank grumbled, "This is the last dog-team trip I ever want to make. We've spent all day doing

what a plane could do in ten minutes." He shook his head. "Do you realize I could fly all the way from the Canadian Arctic down to the Gulf of Mexico in less time than it's taken us for just this little trip?"

We stopped at the Circle roadhouse, chained the dogs in the barn and fed them. Then we opened the roadhouse door and stepped inside. My dad was sitting by the oil-drum stove.

"Hello, Klondy," he said.

Fifteen years had changed Dad, but not much. His pointed cavalier mustache was grizzled now; there was only a rim of snow-white hair around his skull, but he was as straight and handsome as ever, courtly and gallant as he held a chair for me. He still had the restless look of adventure in his face, the same dissatisfied thin mouth, the same urgent dream in his faraway eyes.

"I'm on my way to the Klondike," he said. "I hear they've just hit gold at Dawson. Nuggets as big as boulders . . ."

Never a word about Mother's lonely death, nothing about leaving us in Nome, nothing about my brother Ophir and me. He didn't mention my new husband. He didn't even ask if I had any children. His Viking blue eyes seemed to be fixed on something over the horizon, something no one else could see.

"They say there's a big strike at Ophir Creek. Gold's right there under the grass roots. Got to get a grub-stake together; got to beat the rest of those stampeders. Got to get to Candle before breakup and stake my claim . . ."

Now at last I understood my father. In his own way he'd loved his family, Mother and Ophir and me, but for the first time I realized that we had lived in a world which never existed for him. The past and the future had substance for him, but the present was a shadow.

"Might bump into Rex Beach when I get to Dawson," he continued. "No, hold on, Rex and I came downriver together, didn't we?" It seemed that the past and the future were one. "It's going to be bigger than Nome and the Klondike combined, it's going to be the biggest strike yet." He turned to Frank suddenly. "Come along with me, young man, and I'll stake you in."

"I'm not a prospector," Frank tried to explain. "I'm in wildlife work. I travel all over Alaska."

Dad didn't even hear him. "Travel. That's it, keep going. Going and going, right over the sky line, that's where you'll find it."

Frank looked at him in an odd way I couldn't figure out.

"Nuggets like boulders, just waiting for your pick to uncover. Follow me, young man. You'll be rich like I am." He patted his vest pocket. "You couldn't spare two bits for a cigar?"

Frank bought him a box of cigars. He lit one and waved it condescendingly in his crippled left hand.

"I'll pay you back. I'll cut you in when I make my pile. You'll live in a solid gold mansion . . ."

We left Circle early next morning. Frank wanted to get to Fort Yukon and back to Fairbanks as soon as possible. He gripped the handle bars, cracking his black-

snake whip over the dogs and staring straight ahead. "What's the rush, Frank?" I asked him.

"I've got to send a telegram," he said. "I'm taking that job in Juneau."

Frank was named director of the Alaska Game Commission in 1935. We bought a house with a big bay window looking out over Gastineau Channel. Frank's years of experience in the Arctic, his field trips along the Yukon and the Bering seacoast, had given him a first-hand acquaintance with wildlife conditions, as well as a broad understanding of the problems of traders and trappers and natives who depended on game for their livelihood. Armed with knowledge he had gained on the trail, he set up new wildlife regulations for the territory, which are the basis of Alaska's game laws today.

I never saw Dad again. That summer I got a letter from the superintendent of the Alaska Pioneers' Home in Sitka. Dad had been living there several months, the letter said, and had just passed away. The superintendent told me later that Dad had heard a rumor from some other old-timers that there was pay dirt in a creek on Kruzof Island. He borrowed a rowboat and was starting across the sound when his heart gave out.

That same summer Frank phoned me one morning from the office. He said that a writer named Corey Ford was flying to Alaska to do some articles on wildlife conservation for *The Saturday Evening Post*. Frank was meeting him at the Juneau airport that evening, and wanted to bring him home for supper. I'd never met a

real live author before, and I decided to bake him a lemon meringue pie as a special treat. I spread the filling in the pie shell, and was beating up the meringue when Ginny strolled into the kitchen with her latest acquaintance. Now approaching her teens, she had met a nice boy about her age who'd just moved into Juneau. His father was a pilot, the boy told me. He was going to have an airplane of his own when he grew up and fly right over the North Pole.

"And he's going to take me with him," Ginny told me excitedly. "We're going to travel everywhere, and never stop."

I stared at Ginny, aghast. No, I groaned to myself, not all over again. I thought of the mistake my mother had made, the same mistake I'd almost made myself, and I started to say something, but then I checked myself. Ginny could solve her own problems when the time came. That's something every woman must work out for herself. . . .

I heard her shout from the bay window: "Hurry up, Mother. Daddy's driving up the hill." To finish the meringue, I turned the electric beater up to high speed. There was a grinding sound and the beater flew apart. Tiny nuts and bolts and gears landed all over the lemon filling and sank in.

"Quick, Mother!" Ginny called. "Daddy's stopping at the curb! Now he and that man are getting out!"

There was no way of fishing out all the little screws and nuts, and I didn't have time to make a new pie.

Ginny's voice from the front room was excited.

"They're coming up the walk, Mother. They're climbing the steps."

Well, I thought, if Corey Ford is going to know me, he might as well know me the way I am. I spread the meringue over the filling, nuts and bolts and all, shoved the pie into the oven and hurried to the door.



A B O U T T H E A U T H O R S

KLONDY NELSON was born in Deadwood, South Dakota, of Swedish-American parents. In 1935, after the events described in this book, her husband, Frank Dufresne, became director of the Alaska Game Commission. Since his retirement they have lived near Olympia, Washington. Their waterfront home, so unlike the primitive cabins of Klondy's youth, has many urban conveniences, plus a handsome view of Puget Sound. But the past is never far away, for Klondy's desk overflows with letters from old-time Alaskans, who she thinks are "the greatest." Today her husband is associate editor of *Field and Stream*, and she travels with him on professional jaunts from Alaska to Mexico. At home she likes to bowl and play her violin in a string orchestra, when not absorbed in the current interests of her two children and six grandchildren.

COREY FORD'S writing is done between fishing and traveling. He met the Dufresnes on a trip to Alaska almost twenty years ago, and decided then and there that someday he would help Klondy set down her life story. Although he is best known as a humorist and parodist, under the pseudonym of John Riddell, his numerous books include several wartime volumes about the Air Force, in which he is a reserve Colonel. He

shares his New Hampshire home with his bird dog, an English setter named Cider, who does most of his writing for him. Some of his latest books are: *How to Guess Your Age*, *The Office Party*, *Every Dog Should Have a Man*, and a forthcoming humor anthology, *Has Anybody Seen Me Lately?*

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